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**The Impact of Different Tutorial Strategies in Electronic Conferencing: A Case
Study**

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Abstract

This paper describes a qualitative study of asynchronous electronic conferencing by 3 tutorial groups on the same postgraduate course (*Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages Worldwide*), forming part of a distance MA in Applied Linguistics at the Open University, U.K. The groups varied in the degree to which the tutor participated in the discussion and in whether the tutor's input took the form of responding to student posts or the setting of tasks to scaffold the learners' development of academic skills. It is argued that the least interventionist strategy in terms of tutor response and task-setting resulted in the least productive conference discussion in terms of communicative interaction and academic development, while a more interventionist role by the tutor depended for its success on characteristics of the tutor input and the task set.

The impact of different tutorial strategies in electronic conferencing: A case study

Introduction

Various forms of web-mediated electronic discussions are increasingly being introduced into university courses, with initial evaluations of the particular affordances and pitfalls of this form of interaction among students and between students and tutors raising a number of issues that warrant further investigation (Mason & Bacsich, 1998; Tomie & Boyle, 2000; Warschauer, 2002). Among these is the question of the role of different tutorial strategies in influencing the nature and quality of the tutorial discussion. On the one hand, many researchers have emphasised the importance of the tutor's role, with Laurillard (1993, p.171) going so far as to assert that "the success [of asynchronous CMC] is totally dependent on a good moderator" and Swan (2001, p. 309) arguing that recent research suggests "a heightened need for instructor activity and interaction in on-line environments." These claims are apparently borne out by Light et al's (2000) report on an undergraduate course where lack of tutorial monitoring allowed certain individuals to sabotage the discussion by intimidating and offending fellow students. Absence of teacher input is also problematised by Hawisher & Selfe (1998), who found that the teachers' ideas and attitudes may still dominate a discussion space supposedly "owned" by the students. Against this consensus, however, Dysthe (2002) maintains that a key factor in the success of an electronic tutorial on a particular postgraduate course was its "symmetrical interaction" where, due to the *non*-participation by the tutor, "none of the participants have more authority or power than the others" (p. 341). Collison et al. (2000, p. 12) similarly warn against a tutorial style that attempts to "jump into" the dialogue, or

“lead” the discussion in traditional ways. The question, then, of whether and how tutors should shape, or intervene in, the discussion process remains open. To examine this issue, this paper compares three asynchronous electronic tutorial groups on the same Masters course to assess the impact of strategies taken by different tutors on the nature of the tutorial discussions that took place. It will be argued that, in line with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of learning, the role of the tutor is a crucial variable in providing for optimum outcomes.

Vygotskian psychological/educational theory

As Koschman (1996) points out, the most recent paradigm informing educational technology is that of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), which itself draws heavily on Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective on learning. Two important and inter-related aspects of this latter theory stress the role of inter-mental experience in a learning context (Wertsch, 1985). The first aspect of this is that collaborative achievement on any learning task is argued to precede individual mastery. In other words, inter-mental experience (generally achieved or mediated by talk) is seen as a key step towards individual, intra-mental development. But where neo-Piagetian social-constructivists emphasise the importance in learning of peer interaction (Koschman, 1996), educationists drawing on Vygotsky’s work argue that fruitful interaction involves a more expert party “scaffolding” the learner’s contribution. That is to say, an interactant with greater expertise provides supports or structures for the learner that can gradually be dismantled as the learner gains in mastery (Bruner 1978; Bonk & Kim 1998; Hammond & Gibbons, 2001; Palincsar, 1986). A scaffold limits the difficulty of a task into something manageable by the learner, by such means as providing a model to follow, or a

set of questions to structure the task or by requiring the learner to focus initially on only a sub-component of the larger problem. In the electronic tutorials to be discussed, two different forms of scaffolding are exemplified and can be compared with a third group where the tutor takes a “back seat” and appears more focussed on allowing for a maximally symmetrical interaction.

Data

The three tutorial groups observed were undertaking a course forming part of their MA in Applied Linguistics at the Open University in the U.K.¹. This is a distance education course and the students had no prior personal acquaintance, contributing to the discussion from a variety of locations in the U.K. and Europe. In principle each group was to comprise one tutor and approximately 15 students who would engage in electronic conferencing over a period of two to four weeks, leading to the submission of their first formal written work for the course. (Student numbers in fact varied as will be detailed below). The electronic discussion was conducted through the use of the commercially available *First Class* conferencing software, which allows for asynchronous rather than ‘real time’ interaction. Tutors were to devote about 2 hours overall to reading and responding on the conference and 20% of the value of the first assignment was to be based on the student’s “ability to put forward a point of view in an electronic discussion environment”. The remaining 80% of marks related to a written essay in which students were to critically evaluate two factors proposed as affecting second-language learning. This was to be done in the light of the research reported in one of their readings as well as their own professional experience.

The research was set up to explore the effects of different kinds and degrees of intervention in the tutorial by the tutors, so as to examine the nature and relevance of scaffolding the students' discussions in this environment. Group A constituted a "baseline" in that this tutor simply conducted the tutorial as normal and was given no special instructions or guidelines. (For unconnected reasons, Group A was a temporary amalgamation of 2 groups so in fact there were 29 students here.) For Group B, the tutor was asked to draw the attention of his students to the putting forward of valid arguments during the conference and it was left to his judgement as to how to do this. Our interest was in how scaffolding might be provided by his discursive interventions in the conference itself. Finally, Group C was to incorporate scaffolding through the setting of four specific tasks, which were intended to build up specific skills in relation to student argumentation. These tasks broke the tutorial into phases with a different one undertaken each week. All the material posted on each tutorial conference was collected, together with follow-up questionnaires addressing the students' experience of the tutorial. Our sincere thanks are therefore due to all the students and tutors concerned, who generously allowed us access to their discussion groups.

Analysis

All the contributions to the three conferences were printed out and analysed for the dialogic patterns to be found and in terms of topical content. Drawing on the broad outlines of conversational analysis presented in Eggins & Slade (1996), this involved establishing the following for each student or tutor post: Was the post broadly an offering of information or did it include questions (or other speech acts)? Were questions answered; and if so, by whom? Was the post a response to another post on the conference

or an unrelated offering? If the post was a response, was that response “supportive” or “challenging” in nature (i.e. agreeing or disagreeing with the content of the previous post) and was it in turn responded to? In addition to these interactional features, the content of contributions was discriminated initially into “procedural” and “topic related” categories. That is to say, in all the tutorials, there were some posts that concerned the electronic conference itself – how to use the software, how to retrieve and display messages, problems with posting messages, opening attachments, and so on. Material of this kind was classed as procedural since it pertains neither to the field of second language learning nor to the nature of academic argumentation, which were the two areas of knowledge being built up in the course. For the topic-related contributions, a close reading was undertaken to determine the nature and function of tutor questions, the general content of informational posts and any comments by students on their own cognitive processes.

Findings and Discussion

Overall participation

Table 1 gives the figures for the overall amount of participation in the conference by the three groups.

[PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

While it was obviously anticipated that structuring the conference into four separate tasks would generate more activity by group C, the extent of the differences in participation was still something of a surprise. Not only did the least contributing student in group C (apart from the two latecomers) match the most prolific poster in group A, but even

between groups A and B there was a marked difference. Group A students posted 80 messages between 29 of them, while group B, with only half the number of students, posted slightly more and had three times as much input from the tutor. Of course, quantity of input is not necessarily an important goal and there could be different reasons to account for it – for example, the groups were not exactly the same in the proportion of different nationalities they contained (see Kim & Bonk, 2002 for relevant discussion). Nonetheless, it will be argued that the tutorial set-up itself did play a key part in the variation we see, and that group A students contributed least because of the lack of strategies put in place to create successful dialogue.

Unlike the situation described in Light et al (2000), in these conferences, even where the tutor kept a low profile in the discussion, there was no offensive or ‘flaming’ behaviour from the students towards each other. While only one tutor gave his students initial written advice of the need for appropriate etiquette to be observed in this medium, all students were practising or intending teachers and so were experienced in managing groups or at least likely to be sensitive to the potential effects of their input. This may explain an unexpected feature across all three groups, which was the striking absence of ‘argument’ or explicit disagreement and the active seeking for consensus instead. The creation of a positive interpersonal atmosphere by being considerate towards fellow participants has been noted in more open forums such as email discussion groups (Harrison, 2000), but in the present context it may have worked against the achievement of robust debate. This point will be discussed further below as the nature of the three discussions is presented in more detail.

*Group A***Group A Tutor contributions**

In group A, the tutor contributed about 12% of the posts - almost twice as much as the most vociferous student - but nearly half of these were procedural in nature. Where the tutor contributed to the discussion related to the subject content, his posts were very similar to those made by the student contributors in that he contributed a personal experience related to the field. (See example 1.)

Text example 1: Tutor A sharing personal experience

I thought I'd add my experiences learning French as it seems to be the language we've had messages on so far. When I first learnt French at school we would have to stand up and read something out. Coming from an East London family my accent was pretty strong and it carried over into my French. I found this very embarrassing as a child and it put me off learning languages for a while. I studied French again later and still speak with a 'Cockney-French' accent, but it doesn't bother me now. As to the question of 'why' French verb endings change, I struggled with that too. I always thought English was much more 'logical', until a student asked me 'Why do we use an 's' for he/she/it?' All I could answer was 'We just do'!

While the tutor took care to offer support to a student taking a self-proclaimed 'heretical' line, he was in general no more likely to respond to a student post than anyone else. He did not challenge any student contribution, he asked only a few questions and made only anecdotal contributions to the content talk. His academic role, then, was not therefore one of managing or directing the discussion, or offering much feedback of any kind. The focus instead was very much on the interpersonal function of the conference - encouraging students to participate, sharing personal experience, helping to make

everyone feel welcome and included and thus maintaining a friendly and supportive community, where all are equal. While he took on the role of an authority concerning procedural matters, in other respects, his approach in this first tutorial of the course seemed to be principally directed at maintaining symmetrical interaction rather than stepping up the discussion cognitively.

Group A student contributions

For Group A, the tutor's general instruction was that they should introduce themselves to the group and suggest from their own experience a factor relevant for successful language learning (the theme of the assessment essay). As many as 40% of the student contributions did this without finding any need to make reference to other student posts, which made the conference less successful than it might have been as a forum for collaboration or discussion. The most striking feature of the remaining student posts, however, - those that did address or at least refer to other contributions - was the swapping of shared experience by the participants. Students seemed to be constructing interaction mainly by finding something to agree with. Over and over again there is reference to "similar" and "same" experience, and a refrain of "I (do/must) agree with X", "I too have found..." ran through the conference. Alternatively, there was a repeated expression of "interest" in other posts ("I found your experiences interesting", "I read with interest...", "I was interested to read X's contribution", "it was nice reading your message", and so on). The focus, then, on the students' part was on validating each other's experiences and contributions, creating a positive tenor in the process. Despite this, however, only about one third of the 'responding' posts drew any further response, the majority thus failing Henri's (1995) criterion for genuine interaction, which calls for

the initial contributor to respond to any response. Overall then, the conference was neither highly dialogic nor did it pursue many topics in any depth.

Group B

Group B Tutor contributions

This tutor was specifically trying to alert his students to the making of good arguments and his strategy for doing this appeared to be one recommended by Collison et al. (2000, p.140ff); namely, the modelling of various aspects of “critical thinking” through his own contributions to the discussion. While he avoided overtly challenging the contributions of others, and avoided giving expert information from his position of greater knowledge, just as tutor A did, he differed from tutor A in his use of questioning as a key technique for apprenticing the learners. These were not the “known answer”, “pseudo” questions of much classroom discourse (e.g. *What is the capital of France? - Paris. - Yes, well done*) (See Mehan, 1979; Lemke, 1990), but open questions that invited information from students. On the whole the questions were addressed to the whole group even when responding to individuals, and they typically formed the final move in a contribution with a three-part structure as exemplified in Text e.g. 2 below.

Text example 2: Typical post from tutor B

S B writes:

Living here in the North East of England has been in some situations like learning a whole new language and culture for me. The accent used by some individuals has been very difficult for me to understand not to mention the abundant use of idioms.

I can also attest to the difficulties of the ‘Wayay, hinny, I’m gang nyaem’ strong dialect utterances sometimes heard in the North East.

But what do you think is the motivation of the user, and what effect does it have on the non-dialect-using listener?

As can be seen, a typical tutor post opened with a pasted-in sentence or two from a previous student post containing an opinion or personal experience [given in bold in example 2, as in the conference]. Solidarity with the writer was then achieved by offering a comparable personal experience. This in turn constituted a preface for one or more questions that took the topic further. Thus by participating in the exchange of personal experience like tutor A, tutor B also built solidarity with the group and encouraged camaraderie amongst the tutees. But at the same time, the need to use personal experience as a springboard for taking the topic further was repeatedly modelled.²

If we unpack the different aspects of argument that were brought out through tutor B's questions, we find that they modelled a critical stance in the following ways:

- by shifting from description to causality (as in Text eg. 2 above).
- by inviting comparison to draw attention to the generalisability (or not) of a phenomenon, as in Text e.g. 3 below.

Text example 3

B A. N writes: This seems to be compounded by the fact that the German language seems to demand perfection.

And see what Susan said about Spanish. I have an old tape-recording of myself talking about Blair's first election on Spanish radio in which I consistently refer to Cherie as as an avocado pear rather than a barrister. (el aguacate rather than la abogada - much to the glee of my partner)

Do all languages demand perfection?

Are gender errors really egregious?

- by pressing for justification for assumptions, as in text e.g. 4:

Text example 4

N. E. writes: I hope grammatical awareness will develop with fluency.

Did this happen to us in our first languages?

Is this a chicken/ egg? A tango for two, or will one drive the other? Does 'grammar' drive 'fluency'?

- by encouraging definition/clarification of terms, as in text e.g. 5:

Text example 5

SP writes: ...really focused on fluency, which the vast majority of second language learners do not attain.

mmm, S, what do we mean by 'fluency' here?

Questions were only rarely used, however, to challenge a student contribution and this was not because statements were used to do this instead (there is only one such case in the tutorial). Text e.g. 6 provides a rare example of a set of tutor questions used to challenge a previous post, interestingly one which itself contains an equally rare challenge *by* one of the students.

Text example 6

H. G. writes: S's definition is a watertight one. [Tutor B]'s example only refers to criteria number one: oral. Reading, writing and listening skills also come into it.

Thanks H, I appreciate that my example didn't involve reading and writing. But if it had done so and all parties were satisfied with the transaction, is that enough? Isn't this a case of 'right you are, if you think so'?

What about two students who are satisfied with only talking in present tenses - are we to say that they are proficient?

The impact of Tutor B's strategy on student contributions

One obvious result of the tutor's interventions in the conference was that the discussion was taken further than might otherwise have been the case. His questions were always responded to, sometimes simultaneously by up to three different students. Often one of these responses called forth a further question from the tutor, so initiating a chain of responding back and forth over half a dozen turns in a very 'conversational' way. Perhaps because the threads were longer, the students themselves were also more likely to respond to each other's contributions. Overall about half the student responses were directed at the tutor and half were in response to other students. The result was a more dialogic interaction than achieved by Group A and in fact only 10 of the students' 87 contributions were not clearly linked to another post (most of these occurring towards the beginning of the tutorial).

As well as interactive effects, the tutor's questions deepened the discussion so that points were taken beyond the swapping of personal experience and further reflection was required. Students were implicitly alerted to the importance of clarifying everyday jargon in their field, of exploring general issues, of having individual experience (or experience tied to one context) corroborated or challenged by broader data and of considering the basis of belief and the implications of observations.

There were thus positive impacts both in terms of interaction and cognitive development. At the same time, the asymmetry of the interaction was reflected in a differentiation of roles between tutor and student. The tutor addressed 46 questions to the class compared with 8 genuinely information-seeking questions from the students (40% of which came from a single student). It would seem, then, that the students recognised

the pedagogic function of the tutor's questions and did not adopt questioning as a *student* strategy for learning. Since both questioning and challenging are an integral part of academic argumentation, this could be seen as cause for some concern.

Instead of posing questions themselves, the majority of the students' contributions were like Group A's in two respects: they were statements of personal opinion often backed up by personal experience, or statements supporting another post with validating personal experience. As with Group A, there appears to have been a general wish to support others, including by making a positive meta-comment on another student's post ("this is interesting", "your question is a good one", "I love hearing about Arabic languages", "Good point, S!" and the like).

Where students did follow the tutor's lead, however, was in the convention of pasting in the appropriate part of a previous message at the outset of their own message. This made the whole asynchronous discussion much easier to follow than for Groups A and C, and meant that students did not have to keep introducing the topic they were responding to, so their posts could be more succinct and the whole interaction more like spoken dialogue.

Group C

While Group B exemplifies an approach to scaffolding the discussion through the tutor's discursive interventions, the tutorial for Group C was organised instead into a set of four discrete tasks designed to build skills useful for the written assessment task, with the tutor for the most part limiting his input to procedural matters, like tutor A. This was perhaps inevitable given the huge volume of material produced, simply reading which would have more than filled his quota of time, but it meant that the students got little

feedback on their tasks. (The exception was the final activity, which is different in a number of ways, as will be discussed below). It was also noticeable that because some of the tasks required participants to access and re-read the conference material, and emphasised the importance of referencing material - including on-line discussion material, this group made more use of various features of the software and had far more procedural queries than the other two groups, placing additional pressures on the tutor's time.

One thing that emerges clearly from this conference is that the nature of the student's participation varied depending on the task set. The different tasks (called *activities* in the tutorial) will therefore be discussed briefly in turn. The spread of responses to each activity is summarised in Table 2 and was influenced partly by the number of sub-components to the task and the number of procedural questions it generated, as will be explained below.

[PLACE TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Activity 1

Activity 1 was to brainstorm factors affecting language learning (drawing on personal experience), a task designed to initiate interaction and begin to build knowledge by sharing professional experience. As an opener, this activity appeared highly successful on an interpersonal level. After the first contribution, almost all the subsequent posts made some reference either to the conference as a whole or to specific other student

contributions, as might be expected when ‘brainstorming’. Background information about the students’ experiences and their different contexts thus emerged naturally and incidentally as they explained their views, rather than as a more stilted self introduction, as for group A. There is also evidence that the participants felt they were learning something worthwhile about their topic, given that this activity elicited a total of 20 questions from students to each other (addressed about equally to the whole group or to individuals) – indicating the high level of interest generated. Perhaps because the task was inherently collaborative (unlike the opener for group A) and because questioning was not clearly marked as the tutor’s role (as in group B), the students had both the inclination and the space to take on the role of enquirers. Virtually all student questions were responded to by up to 5 students and several of these responses contained further questions (also responded to) or contained comments that were responded to. This activity, then, without a prominent tutor presence, achieved the same highly dialogic nature as that achieved in the group B tutorial through the tutor’s interventions.

Activity 2.1 and Activity 3

Activity 2 was a five-part task, the first section of which was to “Choose one factor you think affects language learning and give reasons based on your personal experience as learner or teacher”. The aim here was clearly to move students from simply expressing opinions to reasoning and providing some evidence for claims made. While their contributions did this, they generally switched to a much more “written”, formal style of language to do so, often producing mini essays, with the immediate effect that the interactivity of the tutorial declined markedly. Clearly achieving successful interaction on a tutorial conference is highly task-dependent. Activity 3, which asked students to

respond to the following set of questions: “What purpose did [the authors of a course reading] have in writing about language learning? (arguing a point of view?, disagreeing with other research?) What purpose did you have in talking electronically about language learning? What purpose will you have in writing about language learning in your first TMA?” [i.e. assessable essay] similarly produced a series of monologic, sometimes essay-like “answers” unconnected to other posts. Its goal was to get students to focus on purpose and audience and to recognise how these factors affect different genres and modes of communication; thus like Activity 2 part one, it was a highly relevant one in building skills for the essay. But like the earlier task, it did not call for interaction among the participants, so was arguably of marginal value as part of an electronic discussion forum, as students received no feedback on which postings were more successful and why.

Activity 2.2-5

The other parts of activity 2 required students to read back over the conference postings and either endorse or challenge a language learning factor put forward by someone else in the group. They were to use first their own and then another student’s experience and then the literature to support their position. They were also invited if they wished, to respond to any challenges to their views. By the nature of the sub-tasks, most posts were in relation to another post, so had the feel of being a “response” and in any case many were addressed to individual students, so the interactive quality of the tutorial recovered at this point. The activity also had the advantage of requiring consolidation of the discussion so far by re-reading contributions; however this fact meant that there were

as many as 17 posts that were essentially procedural in nature. (For example establishing how to find, display or appropriately reference previous contributions.)

An interesting feature of this activity, which may be due to the participants' desire to avoid "flaming", was that (as with the other groups) there was a noticeable reluctance to challenge others, even though specifically invited to do so by the task here. There were only 5 clear challenges from the 16 students while another 3 posts offered endorsements but with reservations. The possibility of other participants taking it personally when their ideas were challenged is clearly a real one when we note that students felt complimented when their ideas were endorsed, sometimes responding with thanks to the endorser. The fact that no offence was taken to any challenge was probably because these were prefaced with remarks, such as, "I hope you don't mind but I have challenged you on the mother tongue interference idea, mainly because I was casting about for something to challenge and that idea interested me" or "Hi S I found it really interesting reading what you had written but I hope you don't mind me challenging you about two of your comments".

While these tasks were successful in consolidating the brainstorm and alerting students to the need to justify their opinions with evidence, what was disappointing in this activity was not only that there was so little challenging, but that students did not take up the invitation to respond to challenges made to their views. And this was very different from the few spontaneous challenges from elsewhere in the three conferences, which always elicited a defence or a re-thinking of the point. The problem here was almost certainly that students were becoming overloaded with too many sub-tasks to complete in a tight time frame and too many contributions to read: there were 47 posts from the students just completing the sub-tasks of activity 2, quite apart from responses and

procedural discussions. Many students were also still busy “catching up” with earlier tasks, and by the end of activity 3 there were several polite indications from students to the tutor that they were getting exhausted with the demands of the conference on their time and energy.

Activity 4

The final activity for group C was arguably the most interesting as a scaffolding task. The instruction was as follows: “Find examples from the conference (i) Of instances where people have put forward a statement in categorical, non-negotiable terms (ii) Of instances where people have put forward a statement in a way that anticipates and invites alternative perspectives.” The activity was a successful one in dialogic terms: although most students posted only 1 or 2 contributions, almost all made reference to other contributions, and 13 of the 26 posts were wholly or partly responses to other student posts. In cognitive terms, the task was also successful as will be argued below. Its goal was clearly to alert students to the importance of using language in such a way as to position readers effectively, and it proved the most interesting part of the tutorial in various ways.

For one thing, it was only in this activity that the tutor used his expertise in the field and made more than procedural contributions. He contributed nearly 28% of the total posts and 60% of these were related to the content of the task. Secondly, once modelled by some early contributions, students began spontaneously to justify their selections with reasons and/or by highlighting the language choices they saw as relevant. Whether it was their interest in this task or the scaffolding influence of previous tasks foregrounding the need for evidence that prompted this is unknown, but either way the

conference activities can be suggested as having generated the strategy. Most importantly, the students engaged during this activity in metacognitive reflection in a way not prompted by the other tasks or the other tutorial groups, which in turn may have prompted the tutor's greater input. Examples of reflection on their own learning are given below as Text examples 7 a-d, with metacognitive expressions in bold:

Text e.g.s 7: Student reflection on the linguistic nature of reader positioning

a) **It strikes me** that statements which might appear to be non-negotiable have in fact been taken up on the conference whilst statements which invite alternative perspectives have not always met with opposing or differing views.

b) **I wonder** too how much our own ethnic style of expression affects the way we express ideas and opinions...

c) **What I noticed**... is that the same person may be very straightforward in some statements and open to negotiation in others...

d) While writing... **I realised** I was qualifying my language. Instead of saying 'this is a categorical statement', I found myself writing 'it seems to me' etc. Maybe this was the purpose of the exercise!??

Not only did 9 of the 11 students who completed the task make very pertinent reflections of this kind, but there were also some implicit calls for tutor feedback on their reflections (see e.g. 8d). Students appeared to be conscious of having had their attention called to something relevant and interesting and wished to engage in discussion about it.

Summary and Conclusions

The majority of students in all three groups who responded to a post-course questionnaire felt that their electronic tutorials had been a worthwhile experience, and to

different degrees all three groups were reasonably “healthy” according to the criteria suggested in the literature (see Collins et al., 2000, p.77). Perhaps because of initial cautioning material provided to some participants, or perhaps because the groups were all intending or professional teachers, all tutorials maintained a friendly and supportive tone, with no “flaming” and perhaps disappointingly little challenging. Instead all provided the opportunity to become part of a community of fellow learners and in all there was a sharing of professional experience in which the participants expressed interest. Groups A and B contrasted in the degree to which the interaction was symmetrical or asymmetrical, the evidence being that in the absence of a task that really requires collaborative effort and/or challenging cognitive work, a symmetrical conference will not achieve either maximum interaction between participants or significant learning within the academic field. The group B conference provided greater evidence of both of these qualities and it would appear to be the questioning strategy of the tutor that was responsible (together with his model of initially identifying a section of a previous post to respond to). The drawback was that the asymmetrical nature of the interaction meant that students did not take on a questioning role themselves. The task-based tutorial, on the other hand, demonstrated that a high degree of interaction is possible (including dialogue where the learner takes on the role of questioner) where the task design is appropriate, as in activities 1 and 4 and some parts of activity 2.

As a tutorial structured into tasks, the group C conference was potentially rich because the tutor could take a back seat where appropriate (e.g. during the initial brainstorm), but could also contribute expertise during an activity where feedback on student contributions was useful to refine the students’ understandings (e.g. activity 4).

Specific tasks were also useful in requiring reconsideration of posted material and in allowing skills promoted in one task to carry over to another, which may have happened with the students' spontaneous justifications of their responses in activity 4, following the requirement to bring evidence to bear in activity 2. At the same time, the conference became self-defeating when the volume of tasks and material generated overwhelmed both students and tutor, or when the task itself elicited essay-like contributions that (given time constraints) could not be responded to by the tutor and were too monologic to elicit discussion from peers. The lessons from this tutorial are that well-designed tasks can promote both interaction and new reflection on content, without the tutor necessarily being dominant in the conversation, but care must be taken to consider how any particular task is to serve as scaffolding. We would judge that activity 1 did this by broadening the students base of knowledge from which to draw in their essays, and parts of activity 2 constituted scaffolds by providing constrained and manageable practice in argumentation and the sourced provision of evidence (as would be demanded in the essay). Finally activity 4 providing scaffolding by eliciting self-reflection on their own and others' writing styles, which could guide future writing tasks.

It does not appear that leaving students largely free to determine the course of the discussion produced optimum results. Nor does it seem to us the best use of tutorial expertise to limit the tutor to a largely procedural and interpersonally supportive role, which may be the case if symmetrical interaction is given the highest value (or if tutor time is unrealistically limited). This research suggests rather asynchronous tutorials are more effective with a greater degree of tutor intervention. What remains in question, however, is whether the modelling of critical thinking by the tutor, which appeared to

'step up' the discussion in group B but limited their dialogic role, will prove more or less efficient as a form of scaffolding than the setting of tasks to engage the learners in developing particular skills, and in which the tutor can vary the nature and degree of his or her interventions. This will be the subject of further investigations in which the written assignments of students in the three groups are compared in terms of a number of specific aspects of academic argumentation . Further than this, while the relative successes and failures of the group C tasks provide some illuminating data, there still remains much work to be done to determine for any particular context what kinds of tasks, questions, problems and activities are most fruitfully addressed to students as part of an asynchronous electronic tutorial conference.

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Footnotes

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²As the conference progressed, the middle section offering personal anecdote was often absent, and in tutorials 6 months later, the tutor's typical post substituted a quotation from the literature as a preface to his question.

TABLE 1.

Overall participation in the tutorial conference by the 3 groups

Contributors	Group A	Group B	Group C
	29 students	15 students	18 students
Students	80 posts (1-6 per student)	87 posts (2-19 per student)	213 posts (6-36 ^a per student)
Tutor	11 posts	39 posts	44 posts

^aexcluding 2 late enrollees who posted 2 contributions each

TABLE 2.

Participation in different activities by Group C

Contributors	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Activity 4
Students	54 posts (1-11 per student)	104 posts (1-13 per student)	29 posts (1-3 per student)	26 posts (1-7 per student)
Tutor	7 posts	21 posts	6 posts	10 posts