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What is a tutorial? Exposing the hidden curriculum of HE.



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When undergraduate students start their university course their timetable will probably show a selection of lectures, seminars and tutorials, and perhaps other sessions such as workshops and clinics, but how do they know what these are or what their role within them might be? Hubbard *et al.* (2020) tell us that making the language of Higher Education clear and accessible to students is a key factor in enabling them to succeed, but Birtall *et al.* (2022) point out that there is no common language across institutions. This blog sheds light on how we can help students understand the terminology their institution uses to help them engage effectively in the sessions they attend.

Our project was done at the Open University, funded by the PRAXIS Scholarship and Innovation Centre. In the School where the study took place all synchronous taught events were listed on the timetable as tutorials so the project's intentions were to look at what happened in these sessions to see if they were using the same format and to trial the use of a differently labelled session. The data was gathered from a year 2 Childhood and Youth Studies degree module which had approximately one thousand online distance learning students enrolled, a mode of study identified as needing more 'specially tailored' learning experiences (Garrett-Reed 2016, p2). The tutorial observations showed a wide range of different pedagogic practices being used, for example, in some sessions students were encouraged to discuss ideas and respond to each other's comments, in others the focus was on the tutor delivering content. Informed by QAA (2022) guidance which outlined the benefits of providing students with explanations of the terminology used on their modules we included a taught session into the module timetable which was listed as an assessment workshop rather than a tutorial, supported by a clear description of the session's purpose and the expected student contribution.

Student Feedback

- Clearer identification of the session's purpose and expectations gave students confidence to interact with staff.
- The named session was perceived as being less stressful than the usual tutorials.
- Being given information about expectations supported students with mental health difficulties because knowing if they would be asked direct questions or not reduced anxiety.
- Neurodiverse students liked having greater detail about what their role in a session would be and knowing if they could interrupt or ask a question whenever they needed to.

As a result of the project findings modules across the school revised their tuition strategies to offer students a range of named taught sessions with clear information about what will happen within these to try and create a closer match between students' expectations and the experiences they receive. The process also led staff to reflect on their practice, identifying the pedagogic approaches that they felt confident and comfortable with and matching these to specific sessions. Garcia and Nichols (2021) highlight the need for staff to recognise online platforms as digital spaces rather than delivery tools and the project led to professional development opportunities that supported staff to explore how they could develop new spaces, like writing workshops or discussion cafes.

Giving students information about what they can expect when they attend a taught session is not a revolutionary or profound idea but acting to demystify this aspect of the hidden curriculum could make more students feel included. Offering different opportunities for students to engage and interact with their learning can result in more a productive and fulfilling learning experience. It also requires us as academics to reflect on the assumptions we make about our institutional language and how this may be impenetrable for our students. So why not take a minute to think about what you think a tutorial is?

References

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Biography

Dr Jane Dorrian is a lecturer in Early Childhood at the Open University, joining the team in October 2022 after teaching on undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Cardiff Metropolitan University. She started her career as a nursery teacher in the south Wales valleys and also worked as a Local Authority advisory teacher for early years. Her doctoral thesis looked at the professional identities of early childhood practitioners and the impact of policy on their experiences of supporting children. Her current research interests are young children's physical literacy and how engagement in children's physical activity affects the wellbeing of parents and carers.

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