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Scenario #14: Modified Tutorial

The modified tutorial model leans heavily on students as partners. In some versions of the tutorial approach, students might take a common lecture and then meet with the faculty member or teaching assistant in small recitations. In others, they might only meet one-on-one or in very small groups to do the work of the course. In a modified tutorial model, the common lecture could be delivered online and the small meetings could be structured to follow social distancing requirements. The goal of any tutorial model, modified or otherwise, is to develop deep, meaningful, and perhaps even personalized learning experiences.

Arguably this model is as old as formal teaching (and perhaps older, since it is in some respects the collegiate equivalent of the apprenticeship model, or what is often referred to as cognitive or intellectual apprenticeship). To this day, Oxford University and others still employ versions of this one-on-one type of tutorial, while University of Cambridge’s supervisions model has a similar approach but in smaller groups. Most schools likely have something akin to these kinds of tutorials. Many schools have small specialized programs, such as honors programs, in which a faculty member works one-on-one with a student on a thesis. The lecture/recitation structure attempts, in part, a scaled version of this kind of tutorial, albeit with the demands of a large student body in mind.

For colleges and universities attempting to reduce density while still looking to implement a high-touch teaching and learning experience, a modified tutorial model could be a very attractive approach. Like many of the scenarios we have been discussing, a modified tutorial model has many possible variations, and how it might be implemented could come down to a number of factors, from cost to concerns about faculty time to the availability of tutors or TAs. Many approaches to this model, though, could take advantage of both the affordances of available technology and the need for social distancing.

How might a modified tutorial model work? One approach would be to flip the classroom. Lectures or didactic material could be delivered online asynchronously. Faculty or teaching assistants could then meet with their students in small groups. The smaller the groups, the better the experience would likely be for the students. Another approach, perhaps for smaller, discussion-based classes, would be to run the entire class as a small tutorial. Instead of one eighteen-person class meeting three times a week, the

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faculty member might meet in small groups of say six students once a week. Or perhaps even more often for shorter periods of time. The goal would not be to divide the scheduled in-class time into equal parts based on the number of small groups but instead to rethink the class time to encourage deeper engagement and more meaningful community building. These concerns are even more crucial given social distancing requirements to wear masks and to stand behind plexiglass in standard classrooms.

In this approach, faculty might have to spend more time in smaller group meetings, but they would have richer engagements with their students. They could also possibly eliminate time spent on other activities. Or, if this approach is combined with a targeted curriculum or block plan, faculty whose courses were suspended or who are not teaching during a particular block could take on the role of running tutorials with students. This time could also be distributed to TAs or even alumni who might be asked to participate. A modified tutorial model could be an excellent way to involve recent graduates passionate about their alma mater who would like to help during a time when schools are facing unprecedented challenges. Either of these could save faculty members significant amounts of time they could devote to creating course materials or working with students in greatest need.

Perhaps a more engaging approach, though, would be to involve students in the courses in facilitating tutorial sessions. Students could be asked to prepare discussion prompts, meet with their peers, and participate in class in new and dynamic ways. Students running a tutorial in any given week might have an extended discussion session with the faculty member to help them prepare. As almost any faculty member will acknowledge, we tend to learn more about something when we have to teach it. A modified tutorial model lends itself to project-based learning extremely well, where students could be asked to take on different roles as projects evolve. For students, a modified tutorial could lead to a richer, deeper learning experience where they are asked to engage with the material not just as passive consumers but as active intellectual apprentices. Students serving as peer tutors and those participating in class would have smaller, more intimate learning experiences at a time when this personal interaction will be too easily lost.

Besides a deep investment in personalized learning, another advantage of a modified tutorial model is its potential flexibility. Tutorials could be held on campus, in person in small socially distant groups, or online, perhaps rotating between locations as the semester continues. Tutorials could also allow for a quick pivot online or off campus as
the health situation requires. Faculty concerned about their health and safety could meet with groups at a distance, while TAs or peer tutors could meet on campus with students. The flexibility of this model may make it particularly appealing to university leaders who must draw up plans in which the public health situation remains unknown. Efforts during the summer could be focused on the development of the asynchronous online portions of courses, with the decision to hold small tutorial meetings face-to-face or online made when the feasibility of bringing students back to campus becomes more clear.

Considerations

The goal of a modified tutorial model is to develop deep, meaningful, and perhaps even personalized learning experiences with as much flexibility as possible. The challenges, while smaller than some of the models we have been exploring, are worth considering. The biggest may be time and resources. There are limits, for example, to the number of small groups of students that a professor can engage in discussion, conversation, and debate. Breaking a class of twenty or thirty into small tutorial groups for synchronous online or face-to-face discussions with a professor may be manageable, if logistically challenging. Expecting that a professor alone can run tutorial sessions for small groups drawn from a large-enrollment course, however, is difficult to envision. Any consideration of a modified tutorial model would need to be made against the availability and willingness of faculty to embrace this different expectation on their time inherent in this approach.

A challenge, then, for any implementation of a modified tutorial model is mitigating the potential for increased demands on faculty time. As student participation and discussion are channeled into small group meetings in at least one version of this model, the content delivery aspects of a course might be concentrated in asynchronous online materials. This likely involves the recording of lectures, the development of formative and summative online assessments, and perhaps the deployment of online simulations and interactive exercises.

These online elements are input-intensive. Creating quality, concise recorded lectures, or breaking up longer lectures into smaller more digestible chunks appropriate for online learning, requires faculty to invest additional time and effort. While a newly hired and trained army of teaching and learning assistants can certainly help, professors will likely still need to spend time creating the content and assessments of the online asynchronous course. A modified tutorial model might help reduce density in the
classroom by moving the least socially distant element of a course—the lecture delivered in a lecture hall—to online recorded lectures, exercises, and assessments. This reduction in classroom density, however, might come at the price of faculty time to develop online course materials.

Perhaps the bigger expense of faculty time, though, is the potential time meeting with students. If schools are unable to hire TAs or adopt curricula in which students in a class serve as peer tutors, faculty may be asked to spend more time meeting with students than they are used to. This increased expectation of time is difficult to ask at any school, especially when faculty are spread thin trying to manage teaching in a new, socially distanced mode. Any successful implementation of a modified tutorial model will likely need to employ teaching assistants and peer tutors. Involving students in their learning as course assistants has benefits beyond those of reducing the amount of time a faculty member can devote to any one course. Faculty will be asked to adopt teaching approaches that they are unfamiliar with. Students will be asked to learn in new modes and ways of being on and off campus.

The best thing any school can do is to bring students into the teaching and learning process. Asking students to serve as course assistants—as learning assistants—helps deepen their experience with the course material, but more than this it helps students see they are part of a learning community. They are part of a body of people creating and exchanging knowledge. And perhaps most importantly, they can contribute to this activity.