

Tutorials: Students' viewpoint

Tutorial is an important teaching-learning tool. It helps learners enhance their intellectual, communication and social skills. The Medical Council of India, in its latest reforms on medical curricula, has emphasized the need to increase small group teaching sessions.^[1] In the Department of Pharmacology, tutorials for undergraduates are conducted once a week, for an hour. Teachers, including postgraduate students, get a batch of 12-15 students each with whom they discuss the tutorial topic (decided by the university). Students are required to prepare for the tutorial. However, we have observed that students do not attend tutorials, regularly. (On an average only 45- 50% of students attend tutorials.) Even those who attend tutorials do so without adequate preparation although they are given one week to study the topic. As a result, there is hardly any useful discussion between the tutor and the students and the tutorial becomes a mere lecture. A study was therefore conducted to find the reasons for such a poor response to tutorials.

A questionnaire with open and closed questions was prepared. It was pre-validated by five senior staff members of the department and permission was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee. The questionnaire was administered to 50 randomly selected students of our institution, doing their II MBBS, III semester.

Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents said it was necessary to have tutorials and 92% agreed that the topics covered in tutorials were important. However, they also suggested that the topics be chosen mutually by the tutor and the students. An overwhelming 96% agreed that it was important to study the topic before the tutorial and 80% said that if students failed to do so, then the tutorial would not serve its purpose.

The reasons given by the respondents for inadequate preparation were as follows:

- i. Need to prepare for other subjects (50%).
- ii. Lack of time (40%).
- iii. Extracurricular activities (18%).

When asked about the environment during the tutorial, 90% of the respondents said a few students dominated the tutorial, while a majority (90%) pointed out that it was the teacher who spoke the most in class. When asked to comment on the frequency and duration of tutorials, 80% opined that tutorials should be conducted once a week for an hour and 40% suggested that multiple choice questions (MCQs) and case studies be included in the tutorials.

The reasons given for not attending the tutorials were as follows:

- i. Failure to read and prepare for the tutorial (50%).
- ii. The tutorial was rescheduled several times (40%).
- iii. The tutor was a postgraduate student, not a teacher (20%).
- iv. The tutorial was not conducted properly (14%).

(However, respondents did not explain this reason.)

- v. The tutorial timings were not convenient (10%).

It is encouraging to find that students consider tutorials necessary and important. They also understand the importance of preparing for the tutorial. Therefore, failure to prepare for the tutorial topic is an important reason for poor attendance.

Another reason for low student interest is the rescheduling of timings. Students have to prepare for the topic repeatedly. Therefore, as far as possible, teachers should ensure that tutorials are held as per schedule.

The third reason for poor student turnout is that the tutorials are conducted by postgraduate students, not senior teachers. Often, third year postgraduate students are told to handle the tutorial. Due to inexperience, little interest in teaching and/or a busy schedule, the postgraduate student does not do justice to the subject or the class. Ideally, the postgraduate student should handle a tutorial under the guidance of a senior teacher. However, many departments do not have enough teachers and therefore allot postgraduate students to tutorials. Many respondents to the questionnaire have indicated that often a few students dominate the tutorial. This is a common problem.^[2] Students who know too much or who are, by nature, domineering could hamper the learning process of other students. The tutor needs to tactfully handle such a situation by ensuring that equal attention is paid to all the students.

Although the tutorial topics are decided either by the university or by the respective colleges, it is necessary to involve students in the process of topic selection. By doing so, difficult subjects can be given special attention.

As suggested by the students, it is also necessary to incorporate MCQs and case studies. This will help students during the examinations. It will also help them understand real life scenarios, while making the tutorial interesting. A simultaneous assessment process and inclusion of marks for internal assessment would ensure better attendance and greater student participation.

These suggestions, based on feedback from students, should be kept in mind while planning and conducting tutorials for undergraduate students. Only then will a tutorial become a fruitful exercise.

A. V. Karve

Department of Pharmacology and Therapeutics,
Seth G.S. Medical College & KEM Hospital,
Parel, Mumbai - 400 012, India
E-mail: ashkarve@yahoo.co.in

References

1. Medical Council of India. Undergraduate Medical Education Regulation. Gazette of India: Part III, section 4; 1997.
2. Jaques D. ABC of Learning and Teaching in Medicine: Teaching small groups. Br Med J 2003;326:492-4.

Annexure: Questionnaire

1. Do you think it is necessary to have tutorials?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
2. Should it be made compulsory to attend tutorials?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
3. State any 2 important reasons for not attending tutorials.
4. What is your opinion about the topics covered in the tutorials?
 - a) Not important
 - b) Repetition of the lecture
 - c) A few are important
5. Do you think students and teachers should mutually decide the topic?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
6. Is it important for students to read the topic before the tutorial?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No

If yes, why do students fail to do so?
7. If students fail to prepare for the tutorial, do you think the purpose of the tutorial is served?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
8. How is the environment during tutorials?
 - a) Friendly
 - b) The teacher is strict
 - c) A few students dominate
 - d) Any other
9. How is the tutorial conducted?
 - a) Only the teacher talks
 - b) Only the students talk
 - c) Both the teacher and students talk
10. What should be the frequency of tutorials?
 - a) Once in 2 weeks
 - b) Once a week
 - c) Any other
11. What should be the duration of one tutorial?
 - a) <1 hr
 - b) 1 hr
 - c) >1 hr
12. Any additional comments and suggestions...