

## Tutoring, private lessons, coaching, personal tuition, one-to-one and how we describe what we do might matter in the end

When I was a teenager, my English teacher went to great lengths to explain that while different words might *refer* to the same thing they never quite *mean* the same thing. Whichever words one used to describe an object or activity tended to carry a different tone and suggest a different context. The description of Sheffield as ‘a multicultural former steel town in the North of England’ and as ‘a leafy university town in South Yorkshire’ both *refer* to the city of Sheffield but the connotations and tone are quite different.

The Editor of the Tutor Pages, Henry Fagg in one of his recent articles <http://www.thetutorpages.com/private-tuition> listed the different ways tutoring is often described: sometimes as *one-to-one tuition*, other times as *personal* tuition or *private* lessons, and some use the word *coaching*. Despite my former teacher’s efforts, I have up to now been ready to use these terms interchangeably with little regard for the different *tone* or *context* that these descriptions might evoke. Perhaps I should have heeded my teacher’s advice before now.

A young Chelsea mum in a tracksuit with the word ‘juicy’ written on it, recently mentioned to me that she had a *personal* trainer while her son had a *private* tutor. It crossed my mind that she could equally have stated that she had a *private* trainer and that her son had a *personal* tutor. Would that have conveyed anything different about the services they were both receiving? We seem more inclined to insert the word *private* before tutor and *personal* before trainer. Does this matter particularly? Well it might.

The words *private* and *personal* can mean a lot of things: in the case of education and health, *private* often denotes fee-paying and perhaps privileged. Both *private* and *personal* can also mean not intended to be known or shared publicly. *Personal* is perhaps used more for the physical body, hence for the personal trainer. However, *private* too is a word with considerable and often emotive resonance that can spill over to what it describes, for example a *private* beach or a *private* club conveys a different sense than if we were to simply use the word *beach* or *club* on their own.

A university lecturer trying to teach me some French philosophy went to even greater lengths to explain to me that ‘*context*’ can be important and often when we conflate an object or an activity with a *context*, we often find our judgement being influenced more by the context than the object or the activity itself. Let us take some examples which might help to explain this more clearly: South African wine for instance. It would have been very difficult to say anything praiseworthy about South African wine during the apartheid era as the merits or otherwise of the wine had become so conflated with the apartheid context.

Let’s take another example: the game of croquet. If croquet conjures up a context of manor houses and upper class living, one might form an opinion of croquet that would be influenced by this context even though a mallet, ball and some flat grass is all that is *essentially* involved and can be deployed in a variety of more modest settings

Let’s take one final example: darts. I once recall (or perhaps I dreamt it) reading a passage from a novel by the French author Gustave Flaubert where he describes young French male aristocrats getting up from lunch to play a game of darts with their elegant lady friends in the garden of a beautiful manor house. Surely not *darts* I thought to myself. The image brought a smile to my face as darts an *activity* I had so strongly associated with a *context* - the likes of Jocky Wilson, rotund, medallion-wearing, beer-swilling working-men in a pub - had become inseparable from the activity of darts itself.

What has all this got to do with tutoring you might say?

Well if tutoring is strongly associated with a certain *context* i.e. perceived as nearly *always* private and a fee-paying and exclusive activity, it might provoke a reaction that relates more to the *context* than the actual activity of one-to-one, personal tutoring itself. Some might be inclined to say why sure, this is a statement of the rather obvious. It might also suggest though that we might need to be more aware of the language we use to describe what we do - especially if it reinforces an impression that one-to-one tuition is overwhelmingly an exclusive and privileged activity. If we tutoring practitioners conflate our one-to-one teaching activity with a *context* that many might find even provocative, it runs the danger of inviting more hostile comment than might otherwise be the case if we described what we do more neutrally or with less value-laden terms.

Sometimes critics of tutoring are clearly denouncing more the *context* than the activity of tutoring itself but not making it clear that they are. But first an irrelevant joke:

My uncle John Joe was a strong-willed Irish farmer who happened to hate the golfers in his town: 'they get on my nerves' – he said to me once. So much did he dislike them that when the local golf club built on a glass conservatory to the club house he deliberately crashed his car into it. When up in front of the local magistrates defending himself, he maintained he had nothing against *golf itself* just the way people who played *it carry on*. My uncle, at least when it came to golf, was capable of subtle distinctions.

However, when I met him last, he told me that his focus was now on the 'horsey crowd' who were annoying him. 'The mere sight of a horse makes me feel sick' – he uttered with no little menace. With the 'horsey-crowd', even I could see, that my uncle (although I didn't tell him), was beginning to lapse into conflating activity with context. Surely the horses could be kept out of it – I thought. No need to dredge too deeply for meaning here – it's just a story.

Although, if we look at some of the critical utterances made about one-to-one tutoring especially by school heads, it might be interesting to examine the *extent* to which activity and context are being conflated.

A useful exercise might be to first ask, are such critics denouncing the activity of tutoring itself or just the context or both activity *and* context and if so to what extent? The following headlines suggest they are often doing both and that the activity of tutoring is being conflated with context. 'Hiring private tutors is insane' (The Times, May 2014) – (If the tutors were free – would it still be insane?) . 'Doubts over *extra* tuition success' (Institute of Education, May 2005). (What constitutes *extra*? Would some tuition be beneficial?). 'Children left exhausted by endemic tutoring culture' (Daily Telegraph, November 2013). (Here at least the focus is clearly on context although they believe it's tuition that ought to give way). The rest of this note will assert that we should in discussions about tutoring try to be more clear between the activity of tutoring itself and the context in which it takes place.

There are many contexts in which one-to-one teaching takes place and many of these are not controversial. In the arts and sports for instance, people often refer to their voice *coach* or sporting coach. People coming from a sporting or artistic background treat one-to-one instruction as being quite normal and practical. Equally when schools use one-to-one tutoring methods to assist children on Free School Meals to catch up, nobody questions the effectiveness of personal tuition. When adults use tutors to help them with some subject or other, the *effectiveness* of one-to-one tutoring is hardly ever disputed.

To dismiss one-to-one instruction would be to reject an activity that permeates our everyday lives. When a father takes his son fly-fishing, or a mother shows their child how to tie their shoe laces up, nobody interjects and says; 'hang on a second, have you considered the limitations of the one-to-one model here'? Or 'you are exhausting that poor kid'. So, to oppose one-to-one teaching/instruction *in itself* is a bit ridiculous. Any debate about the merits of tutoring, personal tutors, one-to-one coaching ought to be therefore about *context* and context alone. It makes little sense to impugn the *activity* of tutoring as a whole, since one-to-one instruction so clearly plays a large part in how we all as individuals learn how to live and to survive.

The more critics of tutoring conflate context with activity, the more irrelevant and unworldly any subsequent discussion seems likely to become.

Instead three areas around the *context* of tutoring that stand out for me for critical discussion would be:

- 1) To engage openly and responsibly with the inequality context in which tuition is currently taking place. My personal experience of one-to-one tuition is one in which I see resources devoted towards preventing the already privileged from sliding down and not enough towards helping the less privileged to rise.
- 2) The UK's tutoring industry should have no truck with essay-mills and plagiarism which undermines meritocratic educational provision and damages the British educational brand. In my years of working in tutoring, people asking for 'help with *editing* coursework' or requests to help someone 'struggling with a dissertation' although still thankfully infrequent have become more widespread. These types of requests should be seen for what they often are - euphemisms for 'soft-cheating'. That's not to say that assistance with a training emphasis is not legitimate but we need to be mindful of our responsibilities to behave ethically and to safeguard the UK's educational reputation.
- 3) Supplementary education in the Far East, especially in South Korea has become a rather brash and oppressive business. There seems to be evidence that children's lives are adversely affected by this and the concomitant levels of stress associated with trying to pass exams has reached intolerable levels for many young pupils in Asia. The UK tutoring and supplementary education sector should be clear about wanting to work towards a healthy balance between study and other cultural and sporting activities. As a society, we should strive to produce independent-minded and rounded individuals not one-dimensional exam-passing automatons.

#### Concluding comments

Analysing language and descriptions in the way done above can often get bogged down in self-referring and a tautological way of thinking. I am not sure this has been avoided here entirely.

In simple terms, what are the takeaways from this? Perhaps two simple points:

First, a sector like tutoring and supplementary education that is increasingly thinking about its overall reputation might need to be more thoughtful about how it describes what it generally does, especially if that description evokes a context many people might be likely to share a certain antipathy. *Private* is quite an evocative and sometimes provocative word. *Private* schools perhaps realise this and mainly refer to themselves as the *independent* school sector.

Second, criticism directed at tutoring (when it is not being simply protectionist from school heads) tends to be directed at types of tutoring in specific contexts. The problem is that these critics very

often conflate such contexts with tutoring and supplementary education generally. As often with stereotyping, the reality can be very different.

Thanks to a confluence of developments, tutoring and supplementary education nowadays encompass a wide array of people and contexts. We are all becoming increasingly aware of how technological developments, especially the internet has created the prospect of delivering low cost group and individually tailored courses. And while it is undoubtedly true that many massive open online courses (MOOCs) have a long way to go and currently experience high dropout rates, nonetheless it is an area that is developing and improving rapidly.

For instance, a tutoring colleague of mine who also happens to be a language teacher at Eton College told me that he recently needed to learn Portuguese with a Brazilian emphasis. Having drawn a few blanks in the Windsor area, (presumably Prince Philip was too busy), he simply went online and sourced a language tutor in Sao Paolo, Brazil who now teaches him Portuguese one-to-one live over Skype for £10 per hour.

As we all know, markets can be highly dynamic and what can be *perceived* as exclusive and for a privileged few can rapidly change with time. My parents' generation witnessed the motor car become a normal household item over their lifetime. And over the course of my lifetime, I have seen wine and airline travel transform into something that is now commonly enjoyed in many popular contexts. In Elizabethan England, even tea - the humble 'cuppa' was treated as something exotic and luxurious that only the elite could enjoy.

History tells us that we should be open to perceiving an activity in different contexts and that such contexts often can become far more inclusive with time. Of course, contexts can go in the other direction, from the inclusive to the exclusive. My rural Irish father if he were alive today, would be baffled by the reverential fuss high income diners devote to consuming offal and 'tender braised beef cheeks' nowadays in some of London's more chic restaurants.

As far as tutoring and supplementary education is concerned though, a combination of commercial inventiveness and government programmes such as the Pupil Premium Scheme means we are already living in an era where educational support of this kind can be increasingly regarded as more of an inclusive rather than exclusive activity. The terminology we use to describe this broad range of educational support still often evokes the more exclusive contexts of the past rather than the more inclusive contexts of the present. Perhaps it's time that our sectoral narrative and terminology caught up with these changing contexts.

***Please note that the views expressed here are written in a personal capacity and it should not be assumed that these views reflect those of The Tutors' Association.***

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