

A211 E-tuition Pilot 2003: Final Report

Maria Kasmirli

1 Background

1.1 A211 is a second-level, sixty-point, philosophy course, which has been running since 1999 using traditional face-to-face tuition methods. In 2003 a pilot project in e-tuition was run by two tutors on this course. This report describes the experiences and recommendations of one of those tutors. (For the other, see, the report by Sue Weir.)

1.2 The function of a philosophy tutor is to motivate students to read, discuss, and critically evaluate their course materials, and to give them the skills and confidence needed to approach their written assignments. The challenge of the present project was to do this electronically, without face-to-face contact. As well as ensuring that my students' needs were met (which I regarded as my primary aim), I continually monitored my activities and those of my students in order to see how on-line teaching and learning compared with the face-to-face variety, especially as regards quality assurance and workload.

2. The tutor

I am an experienced philosophy tutor who has taught in various further and higher education institutions, including the universities of Keele, Sheffield, and Wolverhampton. However, prior this pilot, I had no experience of teaching for the OU. In evaluating the project, therefore, my main point of comparison was with provision at conventional institutions, rather than with traditional OU teaching methods. (The present report should thus be seen as complementing that of Sue Weir, who writes from the perspective of an experienced OU AL.)

3. The students

3.1 In September 2002 all students registered for the 2003 presentation of the course were invited to take part in the project. Positive responses were received from forty students, spread throughout the country -- enough for two tutorial groups. Although students were accepted on a 'first come, first served' basis, they were asked to briefly indicate their reasons for opting for on-line tuition. Around two-thirds mentioned a physical disability which prevented them from attending fact-to-face sessions; others cited geographical remoteness or an exceptionally busy lifestyle which made attendance at tutorials inconvenient. (For more detailed information about the motives (and general views) of those in my tutor group see appendix 1.)

3.2 By January 2003, some of initial applicants had pulled out, and two tutor groups were formed, one of fifteen students, the other of twelve -- the latter being mine. Of my twelve students, three dropped out during the course of the year -- two at the mid-point, and one just before the last TMA. None of these was a weak student and I have no reason to think that difficulties arising from e-tuition played any role in their decision (a view confirmed by their responses to the follow-up questionnaire). The first gave up because of family circumstances,

the second because they had over-committed themselves, and the third because they were afraid that they would not get a distinction for the course.

4. Methods

4.1 The main method of tuition throughout the year was by electronic conferencing using the 'First Class' (FC) system. This consists of a series of message boards ('conferences'), to which questions and responses can be posted. The tutorial group had its own dedicated conference to which all students in the group had open access. Messages could be posted in two ways -- either at a specific time when several people were on-line together ('chat' facility), or over several days in the students' own time, as with private email. The year was organized around a series of virtual tutorials, corresponding to the traditional face-to-face ones, in which students worked together in teams. For each of these tutorials, a special sub-conference was opened for a limited period, allowing focused discussion of a specific topic or topics.

4.2 Technical support for setting up hardware and software and for troubleshooting was provided by LTS and AACS. As tutor, I had no responsibility for these aspects of the pilot.

4.3 Initial contact with students was made by telephone and email, and one-to-one pastoral support via telephone and email was available throughout the year. Students were encouraged to use FC for academic queries, though personal telephone support was offered if required. (In fact only one student took up the latter offer -- the majority being happy to use the more public forum.)

4.4 The tutor group's FC presence consisted of a main conference where introductory sessions were held and instructions posted, and a series of sub-conferences including:

- a time-limited sub-conference for each of the 7 tutorial sessions
- an archive, where tutorials were stored after closure
- time for coffee, a social sub-conference, for informal chat
- e-tips, a technical support area, for students to exchange advice and ideas (supplementary to the university's own support network)
- a noticeboard.

The tutorial conferences also contained further sub-conferences, for small team work.

With the exception of the tutorial conferences, all the conferences were open for messages throughout the year.

4.5 Prior to the official start of the course I kept in regular email contact with each member of my group. This served as a warming-up exercise and helped to prepare the ground for the subsequent group work. I kept them informed of when the FC conference would appear on their screens and re-assured them that they did not need a technical background to be able to use the system.

4.6 At the start of the course, I ran an introductory session and a trial tutorial for the whole group, using FC. The former was an ice-breaker. I initiated discussion by introducing myself and inviting students to do the same. I also described my role, explained how tutorials would

be conducted, summarized the basics of FC conferencing, and encouraged students to post any hints and tips they might have on the technical sub-conference. The trial tutorial consisted of a session on basic logic, with very simple exercises for students to complete, working in small teams of three or four. The aim of this was primarily to familiarize students with the FC system and to give them some practice in on-line collaboration. (For a flavour of my initial exchanges with my students, see appendix 2.)

4.7 During the year, I held seven main tutorial sessions, each timed to fall ten to fourteen days before the next TMA cut-off date, and each scheduled to last five days (though I sometimes let them run on for a day or two more, if student interest was particularly high). The general plan of the tutorials was follows. I first posted a worksheet with activities and exercises for students to work with. (These handouts built directly on the course materials, which I assumed students had read. As tutor, my role was not to lecture, but to help clarify the course material and stimulate critical discussion of it. Find a copy of my first tutorial worksheet in appendix 3.) Students were asked to work on the handouts individually, then to discuss their responses in small teams of three or four and draw up team reports for discussion in a plenary session. These team discussions were conducted either via the chat facility or on a sub-conference of the corresponding tutorial conference, and each team had a convenor who was responsible for co-ordinating the discussion and preparing the team's report. During the discussion period I would frequently log on to the conference to check on progress and at the end I would read the plenary reports and provide feedback in the form of corrections, clarifications, suggestion for further work, or an overall summary.

5. Findings: the learner's perspective

5.1 The following comments reflect my own observations, personal comments from students, and responses to the end-of-course questionnaire.

5.2 I found students keen to get to grips both with philosophy and with the technical side of FC usage. Although some struggled a little with the technology at first, they were not frightened to try things out and to share their newly gained knowledge. They soon worked out how to use the 'chat' facility and used it in ways that suited them. For example, teams would agree to 'meet up' at a particular time and then use the facility to discuss their work in real time.

5.3 From the start, students were complimentary of the tutorial system and felt they were getting excellent value from the on-line option. Some had not been able to access tutorial support on previous courses due to disability or remoteness of location, while others felt that the on-line support was superior to that which they had previously received face-to-face. All felt that they gained confidence as they progressed, both in their philosophical abilities and in their communication skills.

5.4 Each on-line tutorial required focused work over a five-day period once a month. Some students said that this was more than a face-to-face tutorial required, but that they were not displeased about this, since they felt they were getting added value -- developing communication and computing skills as well as academic ones. They also valued the

flexibility offered by online teaching and noted that they were saving time and money on travel.

5.5 It was my intention that the organization of the tutorials should evolve as the course progressed, with students increasingly taking control of the process (I regarded this an important transferable skill). I am pleased to report that this did happen -- indeed, sooner than I had anticipated. By the third tutorial, students were spontaneously forming teams, volunteering to act as convenors, and taking ownership of the discussion process. Students knew that they could ask for my help if they needed it, but were encouraged to seek each other's help first and to try to formulate their own answers. I would intervene only to correct outright errors or misconceptions, or to suggest further readings or lines of inquiry. Students responded positively to this strategy, co-operating well and supporting each other's learning. Thus, whereas they initially tended to address queries directly to me, as if seeking an authoritative answer, as time went on they increasingly sought the opinions of their fellow students, and engaged in critical debate among themselves. Such debate is the lifeblood of philosophy and is often hard to stimulate even in face-to-face sessions. I was therefore very pleased to see it emerging so naturally in an electronic forum.

5.6 Some students initially found on-line discussion intimidating, since it involves committing oneself in written form. Later, however, many came to appreciate this aspect of the learning experience, feeling that an electronic forum supports a more relaxed and reflective form of discussion than a face-to-face environment. They could go away and think through their responses before committing themselves publicly, and valued the opportunity to redraft their responses in the light of feedback from their tutor and fellow students.

5.7 On the whole, the group felt that they had enjoyed the on-line learning experience and benefited from it in a number of ways. They said they would take an on-line course again and would recommend on-line learning to others.

6. Findings: the tutor's perspective

6.1 I was pleased to see how much students got from the on-line pilot. The follow comments reflect my experience of the project as a tutor. (I shall not comment on TMA marking since this followed the conventional procedures.)

6.2. The heaviest workload for me came at the beginning of the year. Planning the tutorials and thinking through e-teaching strategies took up a lot of time, but this reflected the fact that I was starting from scratch. In subsequent years, preparation would be a matter of fine-tuning existing strategies rather than developing new ones, and would accordingly be much less demanding.

6.3 Demands on my time gradually decreased throughout the year, as students became more confident in themselves and in their use of the technology. At the start I had several e-mails and phone calls from students who needed reassurance about the nature of on-line conferencing, but by the time of the second TMA, everyone had mastered the basics.

6.4 One possible reservation about on-line teaching concerns the lack of personal engagement with one's students. As someone used to daily contact with her students, I felt somewhat

disassociated from my group this year. The focus of tutorials was almost exclusively academic and I felt that I did not get to know my students on a personal level. I do not think this led to any serious problems in terms of academic or pastoral support, but it did mean that I could not tailor my feedback to students in quite the personal way I would have liked.

6.5 A second reservation (and perhaps a more serious one) concerns the technical side of FC. Each tutorial sub-conference was meant to go live a day before the tutorial was due to start, but sometimes they would not appear on time. This was annoying and unsettling both for students and for me. On one occasion I had to carry out the tutorial on a separate makeshift sub-conference. On other occasions messages unexpectedly disappeared from sub-conferences. This was particularly unfortunate when it involved the loss of tutorial materials. Students thought that their contributions would be safely stored and available for future use, and were upset to find them deleted.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Students value on-line learning, not only for its academic functions, but also for the various transferable skills it cultivates, including ones in computing, written communication, and team-work. They also value the opportunity for extended reflective discussion, which many prefer to what they see as the more confrontational style of face-to-face tutorials.

7.2 If structured well, electronic tutorials can support academic discussion of a highly focused kind. E-tuition appears particularly appropriate for disciplines such as philosophy where it is important to cultivate sustained critical discussion.

7.3 From the tutor's perspective e-tuition does not require significantly more work than the face-to-face variety. (More work is required in the early stages, but this evens out over the course of the year.) On the negative side, the opportunities for personal engagement with students are limited by the nature of the medium.

7.4 There was no evidence to indicate that e-tuition creates retention problems, though it hard to draw significant conclusions from such a small sample.

7.5 The conclusions of this report have been, on the whole, strongly positive. It must be stressed, however, that its findings apply to a second-level course in a discipline which is, I think, particularly well-suited to electronic presentation. It remains to be seen whether similar results would be obtained on other courses. In particular, it is unclear whether e-tuition would be equally successful on a foundation-level course, where students may require additional support and closer personal engagement with their tutor.

7.6 The success of e-tuition depends crucially on managing student expectations at an early stage -- prior to and during the early weeks of the course. It is important to clarify expectations and to reassure students about the technical demands of the system, so that they have the confidence to take the first steps. Once they have done this, they quickly find their feet and begin to appreciate the potential of the system.

7.7 It is essential that the technical side of e-tuition system functions smoothly, in order to prevent stress and loss of confidence among students and tutors.

Appendix 1

[This appendix contains the end-of-course questionnaire posted to all students in my group. For all questions, except question 7, the numbers in square brackets indicate the number of students who selected a particular response.]

A211 On-line group pilot 2003: end-of-course questionnaire and results.

The following questions are designed to help us assess the pilot study and plan future provision of online tuition. There is no need to give your name unless you wish to do so.

Your participation in the survey would be of value even if you do not expect to complete the course.

- 1) What were your reasons for choosing online tuition? (You may tick as many options as you like.)
 - [8] I cannot easily get to tutorials
 - [3] I liked the idea of being taught online
 - [2] I was curious as to the nature on online tuition
 - [1] I dislike face-to-face tuition
 - [1] Other (please specify)

- 2) How hard did you find the technical side of using First Class?
 - [0] I found it very problematic
 - [2] I had some difficulties with it
 - [7] I had no significant difficulty with it

- 3) Did you find the initial contact online intimidating?
 - [0] Yes, very intimidating
 - [2] Yes, a little intimidating
 - [7] No, not intimidating at all

4) How did this compare to initial face-to-face tutorial contact on other courses?

- [1] Online contact was more intimidating
- [2] About the same
- [5] Online contact was less intimidating
- [1] I have not experienced face-to-face tutorial contact

5) How many online tutorials have you taken part in on A211 this year?

- [7] All
- [2] Three or more
- [0] One or two
- [0] None

6) Where you have taken part in tutorials have you:

- [7] Contributed fully
 - [2] Contributed a little
 - [0] Just read/downloaded other students' and tutor's contributions
 - [0] Just read/ downloaded tutor's materials
 - [0] Other (please specify)
-

7) How satisfactory have you found the online tutorials (so far) in regard to:

(Please rate on a five-point scale, where 5 = highly satisfied, 1 = not satisfied at all.)

timing in relation to Study Calendar and TMAs?

- [5 – 4 responses]
- [4 – 3 responses]
- [3 – 2 responses]

content (e.g. amount, relevance and level of what you have learnt through tutorials)?

- [5 – 6 responses]
- [4 – 2 responses]
- [3 – 1 response]

activities (e.g. practice in 'doing' philosophy; discussion with other students?)

[5 – 4 responses]

[4 – 3 responses]

[3 – 1 response]

[1 – 1 response]

group work (e.g. discussions; and co-ordination of tutorials)?

[5 – 4 responses]

[4 – 3 responses]

[3 – 2 responses]

8) Was the time allotted to each tutorial (about 5-6 days in most cases):

[0] Too long

[9] About right

[0] Too short

9) Was the amount of work required for each tutorial:

[0] Too much

[9] About right

[0] Too little

10) How long before the cut-off date of each TMA would you prefer to have tutorials?

[8] 1 week – 10 days

[3] 2 weeks

[0] Just after the cut-off date

[0] Other (please specify)

11) In what other ways do you think online tutorials could be improved? (Please give brief details.)

[Three students drew attention to the technical side of the tutorials.]

- 12) In what ways do you think online contact **other than in tutorials** could be improved? (Please give brief details.)

[Most students had no comments. One student suggested one face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the course.]

- 13) If you have taken part in face-to-face tuition (group tutorials) in connection with previous OU courses, please compare the quality of your experience of online tuition overall.

- [4] Online tuition has been much better
 [4] Online tuition has been somewhat better
 [1] About the same
 [0] Online tuition has been somewhat less satisfactory
 [0] Online tuition has been much less satisfactory

- 14) Did you at any stage consider giving up the course because of problems with the online aspect of the tuition? If yes, please explain.

[All students' said 'no'.]

- 15) Do you think that you might have given up the course if online tuition had **not** been available?

- [0] Yes
 [4] Perhaps
 [5] Definitely not
 [0] Unsure

- 16) If offered the option of online tuition instead of face-to-face tutorials for a future course would you be likely to choose it?

- [6] Definitely, yes
- [3] Perhaps
- [0] Definitely, no
- [0] Not sure

17) Would you recommend online tuition instead of face-to-face tutorials to future A211 students?

- [6] Definitely, yes
- [2] Perhaps
- [0] Definitely, no
- [1] Not sure

18) Please tell us anything else that you think might help us in making decisions regarding future provision of online tuition.

19) How many TMAs have you submitted on this course so far?

- 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

[8]

When you have completed the questionnaire, please return it as soon as possible in the pre-paid envelope provided.

Many thanks

Maria Kasmirli.

Appendix 2

[This appendix includes some examples of messages I posted on FC conference in the early days of the course to help re-assure students and familiarize them with the conferencing system.]

Examples of early messages to students.

1. Trial tutorial [Message posted in preparation for the trial tutorial.]

Hi all!

Thanks for all your messages! You've been extremely co-operative and friendly and I'm pleased we are beginning to get know each other. Now that the hard stuff is out of the way and we are all practised message-senders, let's begin to get a dialogue going!

The course is starting this Saturday and you'll need to follow your study calendars from then on. If you have time before that, though, why don't you glance at the Appendix to the first book (*Arguments for Freedom*, p.239). It isn't very long, but it is thorough, clear, and full of activities for you to have fun with. It also includes extracts on questions such as 'What makes a thinker a philosopher?', 'What can philosophy contribute to public debate?', 'What is the value of studying philosophy?' and finally, 'What is philosophy?'. Why don't we discuss these a bit? It'll make a great start to the course, and give you the opportunity to say what you thought of the extracts. It'll also give us all a gentle push into dialogue mode.

Who will volunteer to get the ball rolling? You might just ask a question to which the rest of us can respond. Or you might tell us what you thought of one of the extracts. Who'll go first? I'll do it, if no one else wants to, but it would be nice for one of you to have the honour of setting things off. Go on guys—you can do it! `

Maria

2. Sub-conferences [Message introducing the FC sub-conferences.]

In the main conference you'll find five sub-conferences. 'Tutorial 1' is self-explanatory: we'll carry out our first tutorial exercises in this sub-conference. (In due time, there will be a time-limited sub-conference for each of the 7 tutorial sessions.) 'E-tips' will contain a bank of tips -- things we have found to work well doing our tutorials and things we have decided don't work. 'Noticeboard' will be used for anything we want to draw each other's attention to. Feel free to post your own notices there. 'Time for coffee' is for informal chat. Here you share your worries, anxieties, amusing stories, and so on. Finally the 'Archive' will serve as a bank for our past tutorials.

3. Tutorials [Message introducing the tutorial system.]

Each tutorial will open ten to fourteen days before the next TMA's cut-off date and stay open for five days. For the most part you will work on the tutorials amongst yourselves, but I'll get you started by putting together certain activities and exercises for you to work individually. After that, you will work on the tutorial amongst yourselves in small teams. (I will help you form your first teams and will nominate a team convenor to co-ordinate your discussions and summarize your views.) On the fifth day you will be invited to have a plenary discussion where you can compare and contrast your team findings. During those five days you can contribute at any time, as often you like, and at whatever length you like (within reason, that is, and provided you are always courteous). I'll pop in and out of the tutorial team-groups just in case I'm needed. After the last day, I'll draw your contributions together in a summary.

4. [Message posted prior to the first tutorial]

Dear all,

Our first tutorial is now open. If you go to your Tutorial 1 sub-conference you will find 9 exercises. The first five exercises are essential to your understanding of Berlin's views on the two concepts of freedom. Exercises 6, 7, 8 are hard. Please don't feel you have to attempt them but give at least one of them a go, if you have the time. Exercise 9 is meant to serve as a memory trigger for future use.

For this tutorial I would like you to form in two groups as follows:

Group A	Group B
Elise	Diane
Janice	Kate
Tina	Claire
Judith	Diana
Nicholas	Robert
Ginnette	James

You could split the questions among yourselves, if you like. Please make your contributions individually below each question you choose to answer. You should feel free to do as little or as much as you like—although the more you put in the more you get out. Once you have done what you can look to see what others in your group had to say. Then have a chat with them, if you feel like it. You are meant to work in groups and so co-operation is advisable. You should also choose a spokesperson from your group. Their job would be to summarise the group's views on each question and put their summaries up on **A211 mk2289 C** by Sunday night. I will then bring it all together for you on Monday night. Finally let me say that both groups have the same

material but please try to work within your own group. The reason for this will transpire on Monday night.

Appendix 3

[This is the worksheet used for the first tutorial on Berlin's conceptions of freedom.]

Isaiah Berlin's negative and positive freedom

1. Explain in your own words what Berlin means by 'negative freedom'

2. Explain what Berlin means by 'positive freedom'.

3. Which of the following cases involves a limitation on an individual's negative or positive freedom? Defend your answers by reference what Berlin says.
 - You live in a country where education is obligatory.

 - Your housemates force you to leave the house every time you want to smoke.

 - You have a weakness for pies but you decide that for your heart's sake you should go easy on them.

 - Your child is lazy and the teacher decides not to let them leave school before they complete their work.

 - You want to be nice to your enemies, but they get on your nerves so much that you cannot keep it up.

 - You are a woman in a country where women are expected to be fully covered when they go out.

- Your partner doesn't let you out of the house for fear of losing you.
- The government tells you that they will bomb Iraq in order to protect you and your fellow citizens.
- You want to escape by jumping out of the window but are not tall enough.
- You are a paedophile are forced to get counselling for your own good.
- You are a paedophile and are imprisoned in order to protect children.
- You are too poor to go to university.
- You are imprisoned for a crime you didn't commit.
- You are imprisoned for a crime you did commit.
- You haven't got access to e-mail.
- You are homeless.
- You haven't got the stamina to run a marathon.

4. You should complete exercise 4 in your course book before you move on to the following exercises.

5. What does Berlin say about the abuse of positive freedom?

6. When, if ever, is coercing people for their own sake justifiable? Give your own examples to illustrate your answer.

7. 'It is in British people's best interests to go to war with Iraq -- they simply don't know it'. Discuss this statement in relation to Berlin's views on the abuse of positive freedom.

8. 'Sometimes positive freedom is a form of bullying'. Discuss. What does Berlin say about the abuse of positive freedom?

9. Pretend now that you are asked to explain negative and positive freedom in a nut-shell to a smart person who hasn't read Berlin. How might you put it? For example, you might say that negative freedom is 'left-over freedom' and positive freedom is 'life-plan freedom'. Are these good phrases to use? Can you think of better ones?