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Is there such a thing as a perfect mathematics tutorial?

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The efficacy of mathematics lectures as learning experiences has long been questioned. In contrast, mathematics tutorials are widely seen, by both students and academics, as useful to the learning process. At the University of Sydney, more than 150 tutorials are conducted each week in first year mathematics courses. Approximately half of these are taken by casual tutors (generally postgraduate students). Student surveys over many years have consistently shown that students regard tutorials as valuable, and tutorials are often rated as the most important aspect of the teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that the teaching in tutorials is not always exemplary. At the beginning of 2002 we embarked on a programme to improve the teaching of casual tutors in tutorials. The programme involved training sessions and mentoring of casual tutors by experienced staff members. In order to inform the development of this programme we surveyed more than 1000 first year students, and ran several focus groups. Students were asked to comment on various aspects of tutorials, and to suggest improvements. An analysis of the data indicates very strongly that students have a wide variety of preferred learning styles. Some interesting differences of opinion between advanced and normal students, and between males and females were also apparent. We have also canvassed the views of academics and casual tutors on what makes a tutorial successful. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the views of students and academics do not always coincide. This paper reports some of the more interesting results of the survey, and discusses whether or not it is possible to provide a learning experience which pleases everyone. (Authors' abstract)

Classification: D45

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