

Newman's Idea of a Tutor and its Implementation at the Catholic University

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John Henry Newman was invited to become the founding rector of the Catholic University in Ireland in July 1851. Soon after accepting the invitation he announced his intention to combine the professorial and tutorial systems in his plans, adding that 'the principal making of men must be by the Tutorial system'.¹ A year later, he explained that at Oxford the 'real working men were, not the Professors, but the Tutors',² and that he wished this to be the case in Dublin as well.

My aim is to explore the richness of Newman's idea of a tutor. Though it might seem like a 'lost cause' to revisit the tutorial system, which, because of its expense, has only been fully incorporated into the undergraduate teaching system at Oxford and Cambridge, the Covid pandemic has given us an opportunity to pause and rethink. Certainly, it has made us reconsider our priorities and heightened our awareness of the importance of the personal dimension in education. Is it not an ideal time to reflect on the role of the tutor, as envisaged by Newman?

His practice in Dublin is generally overlooked because it is assumed that, as the Catholic University did not flourish, it is therefore not worth looking at. But this is bad logic. It was an impossible venture: no-one could have made the university work. Given all that Newman achieved in Oxford we would be foolish not to examine how he proposed to adapt the tutorial system for Dublin, and to see his practice there as a corrective to what he wrote about so winningly in the *Idea*.

It looks inevitable that the 'new normal' will see increased reliance on online lectures and that as a result higher education will be impoverished by seeing the human element diminished. But it also offers an opportunity for the academy to rethink its mission and to compensate by introducing counterbalances into the system: for example, the possibility that university lecturers might be able to spend more time in tutorial or small-group work, once released from some of their duties in the lecture hall. By revisiting his arguments for the need of this type of teaching, Newman can open our minds to its benefits and instruct us on its workings. I should emphasise at the outset that for Newman education is an intrinsically *relational* activity. Phrases such as 'mind to

¹ 'Report on the Organization of the Catholic University of Ireland', October 1851, *Campaign*, p. 85.

² Newman to Cullen, 14 August 1852 (not sent), *Campaign*, pp. 276–7. Known as the 'Statement of 14th August, 1852' this letter can be regarded as one of the six foundational documents of the Catholic University.

mind' and 'person to person' crop up repeatedly in his writings, anticipating his choice of motto as a cardinal: *Cor ad Cor Loquitur*.

After graduating from Trinity College, Oxford, and before becoming a college tutor at Oriel College, Newman undertook private tutoring for nearly six years, and during this time gained considerable experience. The college tutorship, despite its name, meant being a college lecturer and teaching groups of between twelve and fifteen students for two or three hours a day. It was an unwieldy system, as the tutor was expected to tackle too many subjects and the pace was reduced by the presence of many backward or idle students. In consequence, a parallel, semi-official system had emerged, in which private coaches were engaged by serious students, or else engaged as 'cram coaches' by idle students in a last-minute attempt to salvage a degree. Not long in the job, Newman decided to offer the more disciplined and promising students 'his sympathy and help in College work',³ and he laid it down as his rule that he would give without charge whatever additional instruction was necessary for those of his pupils who wished to read for an honours degree. Declaring that the system of private tutors brought students unnecessary expense, he undertook to combine in his own person the teaching offices of public tutor and private.

Within a couple of years Newman was joined by two like-minded tutors, Hurrell Froude and Robert Wilberforce, who shared his view that secular education could, if conducted properly, become 'a pastoral cure'. The younger tutors were in perfect harmony with Newman's interpretation of the extant seventeenth-century statutes, which stressed the pastoral role of tutors and maintained (as Newman put it) that 'a Tutor was not a mere academical Policeman, or Constable, but a moral and religious guardian of the youths committed to him'.⁴ They joined Newman in offering the more deserving pupils as much time and attention as the best private tutors; and in doing so the Oriel tutors provided 'the germ of the modern tutorial system' at Oxford.⁵

But that was not all: Newman continued the work of his predecessor, John Keble, in breaking down the distant relations between teacher and taught. Like Keble, Newman read with his pupils, went out for walks with them, breakfasted and dined with them,⁶ and (in

³Newman's memoir, 13 June 1874, *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 90.

⁴Newman's memoir, 13 June 1874, *AW*, p. 91.

⁵M. G. Brock, 'The Oxford of Peel and Gladstone, 1800–1833', *History of the University of Oxford*, 8 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), vol. vi, ed. M. G. Brock & M. C. Curthoys, p. 61.

⁶Newman kept a record ('Memorandum Book about College Pupils', A6.15, BOA; reproduced in P. Lefebvre, 'John Henry Newman tuteur: tradition, rupture, developpement 1826–1831', DEA, Ecole Doctorale des Etudes Anglophones, Paris, 2004, pp. 158–66) of those who ate with him in his rooms, as opposed to Hall, and it reveals that during his first three years as a tutor he breakfasted with students 111 times. On about half these occasions the students were his own tutees – and they were the ones who were more likely to breakfast with him

Newman's own words) 'cultivated relations, not only of intimacy, but of friendship, and almost of equality, putting off, as much as might be, the martinet manner then in fashion with College Tutors, and seeking them in outdoor exercise, on evenings, and in Vacation'.⁷ This emphasis by Newman and the two younger Oriel tutors could be considered as an early manifestation of the revival of character formation, which began in the 1820s in the reformed public schools and then spread to other schools and Oxford and Cambridge over the next forty years.⁸

In Newman the undergraduates found a teacher who took the trouble to master his subject matter, by entering into it not just with his mind but with his whole personality, giving life to the matter under consideration rather than merely conveying it by rote and rule. However dull the material might be – such as the logic they had to cover – Newman had the knack of breathing life into it. From the testimony of his pupils, we know that he challenged each of them to think for himself, to understand what he was reading, and to articulate his ideas; to compare and contrast, to reduce an argument to its simplest form, to test it against historical examples, to recast it in his own words or in a different style, and to make comparisons with the present day.

To monitor pupils on a course where there were few set texts and reading was tailored to individual needs, Newman kept a record of the reading he set his pupils, the plan of study he devised for each of them, and how they coped with it; the warnings they received from him and the provost; and how they performed in exams.⁹ These notes tell us that Newman took stock of each student and adjusted his demands accordingly. Those who were academically able or well-grounded were not allowed to coast unchallenged or to idle their time away, while weaker students were coaxed along and offered support. Where the chemistry of affinity and friendship led to a greater bonding, Newman would exert himself further. Not all students felt comfortable with the close attention Newman offered them, however, and he sometimes had to step back. Newman could be sternly demanding of his pupils, especially if he saw they were wasting their talents and could take a strong reprimand. On one occasion he reproached Henry Wilberforce, the younger brother of his fellow tutor Robert, for wasting two terms: 'Beware of repenting indeed of idleness in the evening, but

repeatedly, though never more than once a term. In the six months from Michaelmas 1829 to Easter 1830 Newman dined privately with undergraduates on no fewer than thirty-three occasions, that is, about twice a week on average.

⁷Newman's memoir, 13 June 1874, *AW*, p. 90.

⁸S. Rothblatt, *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), p. 133.

⁹These can be found in his 'Memorandum Book about College Pupils', A6.15, BOA.

waking next morning thoughtless and careless about it'.¹⁰ It is probably correct to say that an older Newman would have been uneasy with the severity and manner of this remark. But the point is that, for Newman, university was a place of transition from boyhood to adulthood and therefore entailed responsibilities for the maturing individual, as well as greater freedom. At one and the same time he was both kind and understanding to his charges, while remaining firm and demanding. But this degree of formative attention to the needs of students was unusual.

Given the centrality of the tutorial system in Newman's educational thinking, it comes as no surprise to learn that he was determined to incorporate it into the structure of the Catholic University in Dublin. The obstacles were considerable, but that did not deter him. I will mention three. There was no university tradition among Irish Catholics and no appreciation of the benefits that a tutorial system might confer. To establish a tutorial system, he had to 'import' into Ireland those familiar with it and capable of working it, converts to Catholicism who had been educated at Oxford and Cambridge. As the majority were English this presented a problem, as it would displease the nationalist element among the Irish episcopate, who had collected the funds for the university and invited Newman to establish it. Then, of course, there was the expense of such a labour-intensive system for a country that was recovering from four years of famine – the Great Famine. Despite all this, Newman insisted that, as rector, he should have the power of choosing his associates, especially the tutors – at least at the outset.

His proposal was to blend the lecturing and tutoring systems by arranging for the same people to undertake both teaching functions in order that students would benefit from both systems. As with his reforms at Oriel, the question of which system to employ depended on the subject matter being taught. In explaining all this to the Irish bishops Newman pointed out the shortcomings of the lecture system: 'the work of a Professor is not sufficient by itself to form the pupil. The catechetical form of instruction and the closeness of work in a small class are needed besides.' Even if the professor was a man of genius, what was gained from his lectures would often be very superficial. Undoubtedly, students who were academically self-motivated would be able to profit from them; but in general, if the reliance was solely on lectures, 'the result will be undisciplined and unexercised minds, with a few notions, on which they are able to show off, but without any judgment or any solid powers'. Arguing in

¹⁰9 July 1827, *LD* ii, p. 23.

this fashion, Newman arrived at his working rule: ‘that the principal making of men must be by the Tutorial system’. In this way the professor, acting as a tutor,

on a smaller number at a time, and by the catechetical method, will be able to exert those personal influences, which are of the highest importance in the formation and tone of character among the set of students, as well as to provide that the student shall actually prepare the subject for himself, and not be a mere listener at a lecture.¹¹

As at Oriel, the tutors were to select the lectures for their students; to prepare them by ensuring that they had an elementary knowledge of the subject concerned; to question them about their content afterwards; and to help them prepare for exams. Ideally, the tutors would be young men who had only recently taken their degrees, though Newman realised that initially he had no alternative but to rely on older men, the Oxbridge converts.

In his first annual Report about the university to the bishops Newman explained that the tutors would be,

half companions, half advisers of their pupils, that is, of the students; and while their formal office would be that of preparing them for the Professors’ Lectures, and the Examinations [...], they would be thrown together with them in their amusements and recreations; and, gaining their confidence from their almost parity of age, and their having so lately been what the others are still, they may be expected to exercise a salutary influence over them, and will often know more about them than anyone else.¹²

That Newman lavished great care on his choice of tutors in the months leading up to the opening of the University – illustrated by his correspondence – indicates that he considered their selection to be of vital importance to the whole enterprise. In an article in the *Catholic University Gazette* Newman emphasizes that tutorial supervision complements the education imparted at lectures; it was the ideal vehicle for the student’s *intellectual* discipline:

his diligence will be steadily stimulated; he will be kept up to his aim; his progress will be ascertained, and his week’s work, like a labourer’s, measured. It is not easy for a young man to determine for himself whether he has mastered what he has been taught; a careful catechetical training, and a jealous scrutiny into his power of expressing himself and of turning his knowledge to account, will be necessary, if he is really to profit from the able Professors whom he is attending; and all this he will gain from the College Tutor.¹³

After the university had been running for two years Newman composed a digest of the tutorial system for the Scheme of Rules and Regulations, explaining how it fitted into the system of small collegiate house for up to twenty students. Dwelling on the heart of the

¹¹ ‘Report on the Organization of the Catholic University of Ireland’, *Campaign*, pp. 84–5.

¹² Report for the Year 1854–55, *Campaign*, pp. 41–2.

¹³ *Historical Sketches* iii, p. 190.

tutor's task, he explains that the tutor would adjust himself to the needs of each student and cater not just for those who were able and studious, but also for those who showed little love of learning, or had not developed study habits, or were backward. The tutor would oversee the reading of the more promising students by starting them off with advice, explaining the difficult passages of texts, testing them now and again, bringing to their attention points they might have overlooked, helping them with summaries, and generally keeping an eye on them. Different tactics were required for the backward, who would need support to remedy their shortcomings and make the most of their lectures, and for the idle, who would need to be kept on their toes and confronted with their lack of diligence in the run-up to exams. All this would demand of the tutor 'a sustained solicitude, and a mind devoted to his charge'.¹⁴

Newman enlarged on the possibilities of the tutor's role by suggesting that the way to a young man's heart lay through his studies, particularly in the case of the more able. Feeling grateful to the person who takes an interest in the things which are at that moment nearest to his heart, the student opens up to his tutor and from the books before them the two are

led into conversation, speculation, discussion: there is the intercourse of mind with mind, with an intimacy and sincerity which can only be when none others are present. Obscurities of thought, difficulties in philosophy, perplexities of faith, are confidentially brought out, sifted, and solved; and a pagan poet or theorist may thus become the occasion of Christian advancement.¹⁵

In this way the tutor forms the pupil's opinions and becomes the friend, perhaps the guide, of his life after university.

It might be assumed that the founding rector would have been too busy to involve himself directly in the pastoral affairs of the nascent institution, but this would be to misjudge Newman. Not only did he take on the role of dean of one of the collegiate houses, St Mary's, but he lent a hand with the tutoring there. It was typical of Newman that he resisted the temptation to hide away in administrative isolation. After Newman's death, one of the students at St Mary's recalled, 'I learnt more as to the writing of Latin from a few classes given privately to the men of his own house by Newman as its tutor than I did from a longer course' of lectures under the two Professors of Latin and Greek; 'to read the Greek tragedians in the same manner with Newman was, indeed, a classical treat I love to recall'.¹⁶

What can we learn from Newman and his idea of the tutor? Surely it is that

¹⁴ *Campaign*, p. 119.

¹⁵ *Campaign*, p. 119.

¹⁶ Charles de la Pasture to the editor, *The Tablet* 114:3618 (11 September 1909), p. 416.

personal influence is what gives any system its dynamism: the action of mind on mind, personality on personality. This is lacking in systems based solely on the lecture, and even more so when reliant on ‘distance learning’. Newman’s insistence on the pastoral dimension of the academy is a lesson for us today. His daring designs for Oxford came to fruition some fifty years after he sought to reform the tutorial system in the late 1820s. Looking back from the twenty-first century, it seems overly ambitious to have attempted to introduce a modified version of the tutorial system into Ireland in the 1850s when the resources were pitiful and the demand non-existent. Yet it should be noted that Newman’s aim was to replicate Oxbridge arrangements at a time when tutors were generally young academics who had not long graduated.¹⁷

Today, financial pressures are making it hard for the Oxbridge colleges to maintain the tutorial system; elsewhere this luxury cannot even be contemplated. Everywhere, contact time is squeezed out by administrators looking to cut corners and costs. But what if some or most of the lectures were to go – or remain – online, could this not free up time for lecturers to engage in small-group or individual tuition?

In one of his lectures at the Catholic University, Newman compares the relative merits of learning by books and by teachers:

The great moral I would press upon you is this, that in learning to write Latin, as in all learning, you must not trust to books, but only make use of them; not hang like a dead weight upon your teacher, but catch some of his life; handle what is given to you, not as a formula, but as a pattern to copy and as a capital to improve; throw your heart and mind into what you are about, and thus unite the separate advantages of being tutored and of being self-taught, – self-taught, yet without oddities, and tutorized, yet without conventionalities.¹⁸

But what would this ‘prophet of equilibrium’¹⁹ say when called upon to assess the relative merits of in-person and online lectures?

It is worth noting the way Newman took care to distinguish occasional, public lectures, which ‘excite or keep up an interest’ for the University, from the ordinary academic lectures, which affected their purpose by ‘the slow, silent, penetrating, overpowering effects of patience, steadiness, routine and perseverance’.

The *ordinary* object of lectures is *to teach* [not] to amuse, to astonish, and to attract, and thus to have an effect upon public opinion. [...] Lectures are, properly speaking, not exhibitions or exercises of art, but matters of business; they profess to impart

¹⁷ In 1828 the ages of the four Oriel tutors Dornford, Newman, Froude and Wilberforce were, respectively, thirty-four, twenty-seven, twenty-six and twenty-five.

¹⁸ ‘Latin Writing’, 1855, *Idea of a University*, p. 371.

¹⁹ M. Ouellet, ‘The Significance of John Henry Newman for Catholic Theology’, *Lead Kindly Light. Essays for Ian Ker*, ed. P. Shrimpton (Leominster: Gracewing, 2022), p. 65

something definite to those who attend them, and those who attend them profess on their part to receive what the lecturer has to offer. It is a case of contract: ‘I will speak, if you will listen’ – ‘I will come here to learn, if you have any thing worth teaching me.’ In an oratorical display, all the effort is on one side; in a lecture, it is shared between two parties, who co-operate towards a common end.²⁰

But online lecture needs not be display lectures; they could be part of the ordinary business of the university.

Before concluding it should be emphasized that the tutoring and lecturing systems that Newman established were part of a broader system which included exams – both written and oral – and ‘collections’. Newman knew from experience that exams were a major inducement to study. While he strongly disliked cramming and superficial learning, he maintained that regular tests had a specific use in training the intellect: ‘they impart self-confidence, they serve to bring home to a youth what he knows and what he does not, they teach him to bring out his knowledge and to express his meaning clearly’.²¹ For this reason he felt that at Dublin, ‘The Examination system is the key to the whole University Course’.²² Exams at the Catholic University were internal, termly affairs, partly oral and partly written, except for the public exams at the end of the second, third and fourth years. The internal exams were followed by ‘collections’, which meant that students were received individually by the rector in the presence of their tutors and lecturers, who read reports about them. All these measures reflected Newman conviction that the University undertook a grave responsibility of oversight for those who entered its doors; it acted on behalf of parents in its attentiveness to growth in virtue; it was ‘an Alma Mater, knowing her children one by one, not a foundry, or a mint, or a treadmill’.²³

Newman’s idea of the tutor’s role touches on much that makes him special as an educational thinker – and much that is characteristic of him as a person: his interest in his fellow human beings; his stress on the formative value of personal influence; his appreciation for the personal element in the process of understanding and embracing knowledge and faith; his patience with human weakness in the fitful process of maturation; his insistence on the practical. These views were not the outcome of research or reading, but rather the result of many years in education, during which he had established his own high ideals and sought to live them out.

²⁰ ‘Discipline of mind’, 1858, *Idea of a University*, pp. 491, 493.

²¹ Newman to Northcote, 23 February 1872, *LD* xxvi, p. 26. On the other hand, Newman thought that exams by themselves were likely only to ‘promote cramming and create prigs’ (*ibid.*).

²² Newman to MacDermott, 21 August 1858, *LD* xviii, p. 445.

²³ *Idea of a University*, pp. 144–5.