Excerpt from The Tutorial Process, by Howard S. Barrows (revised 1992) 70 pages, paper bound. This is a companion volume to Practice-Based Learning.

Although the term "tutor" may not be ideal for a teacher employing a facilitatory or maieutic teaching style, it has become commonly used in this way. The ability of the tutor to use facilitatory teaching skills during the small group learning process is the major determinant of the quality and the success of any educational method aimed at 1) developing students' thinking or reasoning skills (problem solving, metacognition, critical thinking) as they learn, and 2) helping them to become independent, self-directed learners (learning to learn, learning management). Tutoring is a teaching skill central to problem-based, self-directed learning.

Although tutorial teaching seems natural for some teachers, it is a difficult skill to understand and apply for many teachers who are used to didactic teaching approaches. The intent of this handbook is to present a conceptual basis for facilitatory teaching skills that may make them easier to understand, practice and develop.

Attempts to define this teaching role usually concentrate on what the tutor should not do. He is told that he should not put students into a passive learning role by giving them the facts they need or by lecturing to them; students should actively acquire the facts they need on their own. The tutor is also told that he should not tell his students whether their ideas presented in discussions or their answers to questions are right or wrong; they should find out for themselves, under the tutor's guidance. Descriptions of what the tutor should do are less specific and usually difficult to understand. He is told that the tutor should facilitate or guide learning by encouraging students to present and discuss their own ideas and to determine their own learning needs. The usual result is that the new tutor will either sit in the group and say nothing or will try to encourage student discussion in a non-specific way. Unsure of what to say or how to facilitate learning, he characteristically falls back on the more comfortable and understandable direct teaching or didactic style when students seem to be wandering off course, expressing incorrect information or ignoring important facts and concepts.

The tutorial style associated with the case method of teaching and often seen in movies and television has been analyzed by Collins and Stevens (1983). This teaching style is often confused with the facilitatory tutorial method used in small groups that will be described here. Although the case method teacher does not directly give information to students but challenges them to present their own thinking, he does provide them with information and direction. The case method teacher does this by responding to the students' ideas with counterexamples, absurdities that would result from their ideas, data not explained by their ideas, or by providing them with new facts that will shape their thinking at a critical point. Although the students are required to think and to defend their ideas in the case method, they will usually know from the teacher's responses if they are right or wrong. In the case method, the students are certainly challenged to reason and learn on their own and are not as dependent on the teacher as in more didactic, lecture approaches; but they are not as independent of the teacher as in the facilitatory tutoring method described here. In this method, students learn to become self-reliant and eventually independent of the tutor. This method is particularly important in the education of professionals (medicine, business, law, engineering, social work, etc.) where students are eventually expected to become independent, problem solving, self-motivated learners.