A Summary of "Tutoring Toward Independent Learning: Decreasing Student Dependency on Tutorial Assistance"

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As a learning assistance professional, what led to the focus of my practicum project following the 2006 Kellogg Institute was my concern over the inability to observe a significant progression in independent learning skills among some of the students using the Central Piedmont Community College writing center, particularly international students, over the course of multiple papers or multiple terms. At the same time, these students were reporting high grades on their papers and in their courses. Perhaps that is all some writing center staff would care to hear as a measure of success; however, what interests me is what the student is learning from the tutoring process, which may or may not correlate with the grade he or she ultimately receives in the course. The grade depends on several additional factors, including the instructor's degree of leniency in grading as well as who actually did the student's work. To my mind, that incongruence between grades and observable progress in writing came back partly to tutor training and the need to ensure both that we did not make the presumption that subject knowledge and common sense are all a person needs to be an effective tutor *and* that our tutor training focused on research-based best practices in tutoring methodology rather than on policies and procedures alone. As Boylan (2002) asserts, "The most important aspect of successful tutoring is tutor training. The provision of tutoring by well-trained tutors, as opposed to untrained or marginally trained tutors, is what separates successful tutoring programs from

mediocre tutoring programs" (p. 50). Hock, Schumaker, & Deshler (1995) concur that "although traditional tutorial programs usually employ individuals who are very competent in the targeted subject matter, these individuals…often have very limited, if any, skills related to effectively teaching the content they know" (p. 18). Untrained tutors may believe that good tutoring *is* only a matter of common sense. Marginally trained tutors may have only been exposed to the type of training that consists of a general orientation to the tutoring center along with its policies and procedures. Inadequately trained tutors may also think that any form of "helping" is good for the student, and they may, intentionally or unintentionally, foster a dependent relationship with the student, playing the role of Hero or Enabler (Winnard, 1991). Nancy Grace (2006) explains further:

> Any tutor[s] highly motivated to succeed might also be vulnerable to the belief that they have to be able to solve the student's problems and that if they cannot – for whatever reason – they are responsible for the student's failure and are themselves failures as a result. The result is dual dependency: (1) students who remain unequipped to function independently in college and who rely on the tutor for assistance with problems which the tutor is unprepared to solve, and (2) tutors who consciously or unconsciously delude themselves with the belief that they are totally responsible for the student's success. (para. 10)

By contrast, well-trained tutors know that tutoring does not simply consist of telling the student what to do; they have learned about the importance of "providing opportunity" (MacDonald, 2000, p. 10) for the "active participation of the student in the learning process" (Astin, 1984, p. 522) as the first step toward autonomy rather than dependency upon the tutor (Misick, 1996). Well-trained tutors know that helping students "learn how to learn" (MacDonald, 2000, p. 24) is

the key to students gaining the skills and self-confidence to gradually take control of their own learning.

During the three days spent on the topic of learning assistance at Kellogg with Jane Neuburger of Syracuse University, much information was made available to me through her extensive annotated bibliography, and from that base I extended my research, making use of the Developmental Education library as well as the larger library at Appalachian State. Since that time, I have continued to be heavily influenced by Ross MacDonald's (2000) book, *The Master Tutor,* which I have come to regard as the Bible of learning assistance, and by Hunter Boylan's (2002) *What Works: Research-based Best Practices in Developmental Education.* Foundational research articles included Jacquelyn Maki's (1979) "Beyond the Bandaid" (super old, yet timeless), Nancy Grace's (2006) "The Tutorial Relationship and the Power of Dependency," and Karen Winnard's (1991) "Codependency: Teaching Tutors Not to Rescue." Educational theorists undergirding the development of the project were Astin, Bloom, Cassazza & Silverman, Chickering, Garner, Glasser, Hirsch, Knowles, Maslow, and Piaget.

Following my review of the field literature, I determined four primary objectives for the tutor training program: (1) to offer tutors insight, individually and collectively, into their current strengths and weaknesses as promoters of independent learning; (2) to explore tutoring habits currently in use which may need adjustment in order to move students along the path to more independent learning; (3) to explore some of the theories and concepts that have applications to tutoring; and (4) to attempt to put more effective tutoring techniques into practice. The corresponding research-based training content was delivered six months after Kellogg to part-time employees of the Academic Learning Center, which at that time housed a writing center, math center, study skills center, and computer lab. Fourteen of the employees in attendance were

tutors, three were study skills assistants, and four were computer lab facilitators. The fulltime

coordinators were in and out, although they should have been present throughout because they

had tutoring responsibilities as part of their workloads and needed to examine their own practices

along with those of their staff.

Tutor training day was comprised of a variety of activities and discussion aimed at

meeting the stated objectives.   First, the purpose and focus of the training were presented,

followed by an introduction to MacDonald's (2000) *The Master Tutor* and his Tutor Evaluation

and Self-Assessment Tool (TESAT). When queried, only one employee indicated he had heard

of the text but had not read it and was not familiar with the accompanying tool. The tutors were

then instructed to complete the TESAT, which assessed their use of the 12 steps in an effective

tutoring cycle, as defined by MacDonald. A brief discussion ensued regarding the tutors'

reactions to the content of the TESAT. Some voiced that taking the assessment had made them

think about steps of the tutoring process they had not previously identified or considered

important.

Next, an introduction to the breadth of field literature available involved eliciting tutor

responses, pro or con, to various short quotations about the tutoring process which I had

reproduced on a whiteboard without attributing them to specific authors. After that, a number of

educational and psychological theories that have applications to tutoring were also listed on the

board. Following a background probe to determine how many of the theories were or were not

familiar to them, we went through the list, and the tutors were given the opportunity to volunteer

basic definitions for each of the terms. To the extent that a definition was accurate, nothing was

interjected; if a definition was off track, others were encouraged to share their knowledge in an

attempt to arrive at a workable definition.   Any of the terms that were completely unfamiliar

were introduced in fairly general terms, and open-ended questions were asked about the role each of the concepts might play in collaborative tutoring/learning. On the heels of that discussion, tutors were asked to contribute to a list on the board of techniques they have used or seen used in the center that could be contributing to student dependency on tutoring, along with the reasons those techniques might be employed. The resulting list served as the springboard for a dialogue about what methods we might want to avoid or adopt in the future in order to gradually move students toward more independent learning.

After a break, the first of two tutoring exercises began. The first one involved participants sitting back to back in pairs and having the person representing the student try to put together puzzle-sized pieces of a map of the US, working only from instructions provided by the second person, who played the tutor. The student could not ask any questions and could only provide yes or no answers to questions put to him or her by the tutor. After an initial five minutes to work on putting the puzzle together, the two participants were allowed to rearrange their chairs so that they could sit side by side and communicate without restrictions, even though the participant playing the student was still the only one allowed to move the pieces around the map. Afterwards, the tutors shared their reactions to the restricted versus free modes of communication and learning.

For the second exercise, two of the tutors presented a skit, one playing the role of the tutor and the other playing the student. They had been provided with the script in advance so that they would be adequately prepared in presenting what was intended to be a humorous representation of "bad" tutoring practices which do not give the student much power or input during the tutoring session. After the skit, tutors from mixed subject areas were divided into four groups. In response to the skit, the job of each group was to plan a "good" tutoring session,

keeping in mind the 12 steps of the tutoring cycle and the other tutoring principles that had been the focus of the day. Their starting point for creating a session was the first words a student might say upon coming to the center, words which the tutors had been asked to provide on slips of paper at the beginning of the training and which were now drawn out one slip per group. The teams had 15 minutes to plan their sessions and decide which two team members would present them. The three computer lab assistants served as American Idol judges (their choice of identity) who awarded Olympic-style points to each team, based on its degree of incorporation of the tutoring principles that had been our focus throughout the day, and members of the winning team were awarded individual prizes. The day was closed out by challenging the tutors to continue to reflect on their own practice and to set personal goals for developing more effective tutoring techniques.

Shortly after the training, the TESATs that had been administered at the beginning of the day were scored and returned to the individual tutors, along with a profile of the answers most commonly chosen by the tutors as a group. They were asked to review those answers in order to determine the techniques most in need of improvement and to refer to them periodically as reminders. The profile indicated that the group had ranked themselves on the high end of the scale of expertise: "outstanding" for 37% of the questions, "proficient," 44%; "adequate," 15%; and "needing improvement," 4%. (As Arte Johnson used to say, "V-e-e-r-r-y interesting!"). Three months after the training, tutors were asked to devote at least 15 minutes to completing a seven-question survey in order to provide some qualitative data. (At the time the TESATS were ordered, we did not know that they were intended to be used as both pre and post instruments for the quantitative data, and we were not able to acquire more in time to use them in that way). The open-ended questions asked the tutors to reflect on their current beliefs and practices with regard

to the ethics of doing the students' work, following the steps of the tutoring cycle, adjusting their tutoring techniques, and staying abreast of key literature and developments in the field.

The short-term impact of the training was moderate. On the post-training survey, the vast majority of tutors endorsed the tenets they had been taught in the training. In my observation of their practice, however, some made adjustments to their tutoring techniques that were more long-lasting than those of others. The long-term impact of the training model has been difficult to measure since our training program as a whole comes and goes under different directors of the larger center, a variable that is out of my control. At the same time, there have been policy and procedure adjustments made by the fulltime staff of the ALC that have contributed positively toward the promotion of independent learning and student responsibility, and some of those have been extensions of suggestions made by the tutors on their surveys. Specifically, the center has undergone a transition from walk-in tutoring to an appointment system, which places limits on the number of times students can visit per week and on how long they can stay, which has helped rein in some of our "squatters." In the writing center, limits have also been placed on the number of visits per paper (two) and the amount of help offered with grammar and punctuation. Rules are now modeled for a portion of the paper, and then students are expected to practice applying those rules to the remainder of the paper on their own. Since planning and implementing the tutor training project, I have remained personally committed to a tutoring philosophy that promotes independent learning and student responsibility in the tutoring process, which is also one of the tenets of the Academic Learning Center's mission statement. Retaining this focus within tutor training is imperative to developing tutors who are knowledgeable about what constitutes effective tutoring and to preventing co-dependency between tutors and students.

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