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The Importance of Training Peer Tutors
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Tutoring is a holistic process where a student and a tutor make a mutual journey to discover and practice academic and life skills while searching for and repairing the academic disconnect that has kept the student from becoming a fully self-facilitated learner. The tutor's responsibility is to understand and clearly communicate course material to the student in a manner that facilitates an improved level of proficiency in the subject as well as an increased overall sense of self-esteem for the student. .

In the past decade the tutoring industry has exploded ten-fold. This staggering growth is beneficial for students in many ways especially with regard to accessibility to tutors and the variety of tutorial disciplines (subjects) offered to students; however, this tutor explosion has also brought with it a huge number of untrained, uncertified, and uninsured practitioners. In addition, in the current education/legislative climate, the government confuses tutoring with academic coaching and mentoring, and funds earmarked for tutorial programs are often misspent. Generally the focus is on 'hot-housing' exam preparation and various State and national tests.

Education is an interesting professional field, as it is perhaps the only field where we do copious amounts of research to ascertain and confirm how students learn and how we can improve both classroom and individual instruction, yet we also ignore the research results and do what we have always done because "change" is a bad word. As the saying goes, it's always easier to ride a dead horse than to change horses. It's even easier to blame the poor dead horse or the horse's parents.

One distinct outcome of recent research has been that peer tutoring programs work. They are relatively inexpensive and offer many benefits to both the tutor and the student. That said, the research has also been clear that peer tutors must be trained, given clear direction, and be held to a defined set of standards. Boylan (1997) states that: "A positive outcome for tutoring provided by trained tutors led to improved student performance,

including first-semester GPA, cumulative GPA . . . as well as overall retention." Bailey (2010) noted that the lack of trained tutors in a program limits impact on success. "A lack of coordinated services . . . detracts from student success and lowers grade performance. Unskilled tutors are limited to a few helping strategies."

There are many reasons to support peer tutoring and peer tutor training. Tutoring is an activity that benefits everyone involved - the student, the tutor, and the school, institution, or program. Research has documented that peer tutoring benefits the self-confidence, motivation, attitude towards subject matter and school in general, self-esteem and academic achievement of both the tutor and the student at a variety of grade levels (Robledo, 1990; Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik, 1982). In an extensive review of research and literature about the use of peer and volunteer tutors in secondary and postsecondary education indicates benefits such as higher class and final exam grades, lower drop-out rates, improved attendance, and improved long-term retention of material learned. (Topping, 1996). Harman (1990 in Topping, 1996) suggests that tutoring builds both the tutor's and the student's cognitive processes because it requires attention, motivation, review of existing knowledge and skills, and finding ways to simplify, clarify, and provide examples of difficult or challenging concepts.

The need for trained tutors is clear. Staub and Hunt (1993) concluded that trained tutors had a significantly higher success with students than a control group of tutors who were not trained.

The need for structured and ongoing training is one key to the success of tutorial programs as reported in the AmeriCorps Tutorial Outcomes Study (2001) which cited the following practices as key to tutorial effectiveness.

- Tutors meet with students at least two times per week
- Tutors are trained both prior to and during the tutoring program
- Tutors must meet with students in a structured and scheduled environment.
- Programs must document success in order to be sustained.
- Programs must conduct formal evaluations of tutors, students, and the overall program

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management reports that there are over 500 research documents dealing with the effectiveness of tutoring. A brief review of the research includes:

♦ A list of proven instructional and administrative practices suggests some of the actions teachers and schools can take to enhance student learning and other outcomes. Peer tutoring, with its focus on monitoring, support, and corrective feedback, represents specific means of implementing these practices (Cotton, 2002).

♦ Peer tutoring usually resulted in significant cognitive gains for both the tutor and the student. (Britz, Dixon, and McLaughlin 1989)

♦ In the areas of literacy especially, both the student and tutor make substantial gains in vocabulary, reading accuracy, self-correction and comprehension. (Marious, 2000)

♦ Effects on both peer tutors and students were positive in the areas of learning, attitude toward subject matter, and self-concept. (Cohen and Kulik, 1981)

♦ Peer tutoring is effective, particularly for at-risk students.(Gaustad, 1992)

♦ The evaluations of five {peer tutoring} programs . . . were unanimously positive. Evidence was found for lasting effects, especially if the students continued to receive low-cost follow up. The study also found less attrition in grade and fewer referrals to special education for students in these programs. The findings on achievement are compared to the findings of other interventions -- reduction in class size, use of teacher aides, and the use of an extended school year. One-to-one tutoring is seen as a less costly and more effective alternative to these practices. (Center for Research on the Education of Disadvantaged Students. n.d.).

♦ The research supplies strong evidence that tutoring is an effective strategy for addressing the needs of low-performing students. The research also suggests that: Tutoring programs should have a strong guiding purpose in order to direct the program tutors in their decision making. This guiding purpose should emphasize the diagnostic and prescriptive interaction that is a natural product of tutoring; Individuals of various ages and levels of education can be effective tutors once provided with appropriate training; (Snow, n.d.).

So what do we, as tutorial program coordinators, take from this research? Peer tutoring programs work; they are beneficial to both the student and the tutor on several levels; they are cost-effective, but peer tutors must be trained in order to maintain program standards and the best academic assistance to the students. The National Tutoring Association believes that all tutors, peer or cross-age, should be trained to a minimum of the Basic Level for certification. Subjects for training should include major topics such as: Definition of tutoring; The role of the tutor; Ethics and etiquette in tutoring; Basic communication skills; Good listening practices; Basic study skills; Critical thinking skills; and Recognizing Success. More topics may be added depending on the age of the peer tutors.

Every tutor should be trained so that they can be confident that they are able to serve their student in the best manner possible and with the best strategies available. Let's get everyone off of those dead horses.

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