

*Hans Schmidt*  
**Communication  
Patterns that  
Define the  
Role of the  
University-Level  
Tutor**

*This study considers how communication patterns shape the university tutor role. A combination of ethnographic observations and interviews were used to determine the communication behaviors of university tutors and tutees, which help to define what is, otherwise, an ambiguous role. Specifically, the communicative behaviors engaged in by tutors are relational questioning, content questioning, content explaining, and relational disclosure. Drawing on a relational perspective of communication, the uniqueness of the tutoring role, in comparison to other personal and educational roles, is discussed.*

**D**eveloping as a tutor can be a challenging task. New tutors frequently assume their responsibilities with substantial subject area knowledge, but without a clearly articulated understanding of the role they are to assume (Ellison, 1976; McKellar, 1986). As a result, becoming a university tutor means filling an ambiguous role which new tutors are often left to define for themselves.

The tutor role is ambiguous for a number of reasons. Tutors often begin working with only a slight age or status difference between themselves and the students they will be tutoring and often with very little, if any, instruction on how to enact their role. Further, the role of the tutor contains notable contradictions: tutors must enforce class rules and explain assignments, yet they have no authority over grades; tutors must take a leadership and instructional role themselves, yet they might be peers of tutees in a social setting.

This same type of confusion is faced by tutees as well, who similarly may not understand what is expected of them. Are tutees supposed to

act like they would in class? Are tutors friends, mentors, or professional educators? Both tutees and tutors ask themselves: is this a relationship of friendship, mentoring, or instruction? How formal is too formal? How close is too close? How personal is too personal?

Because there often is no formal set of instructions or prior socialization, these are questions left unanswered. However, in order to be a successful tutor or tutee, both parties must work together to define both the situation and their respective roles. They do this defining through the individually negotiated communication patterns that they engage in while interacting.

This study considers how communication balances the various aspects of the tutor role, including elements of authority, friendship, and mentoring, and focuses on identifying the tutor communication behaviors that define the role. By combining ethnographic observations of tutoring sessions with tutor and tutee interviews, an analysis examined how these patterns lead to the development of the tutor role that is acknowledged and enacted by all parties involved. In the process, one central question is addressed: What communication patterns develop between tutors and tutees that allow for the development of the tutor role?

### **Communication Behaviors of University Tutors and Tutees**

Extensive research has considered tutoring techniques and outcome-driven assessments of tutoring programs and strategies (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, & Moody, 2000; Erion, 2006; Kulik, Kulik, & Schwalb, 1983; Rohrbeck, Ginsburg-Block, Fantuzzo, & Miller, 2003). Additionally, a significant body of research has demonstrated the association between tutoring and student success. Research in recent years has shown how tutoring programs can help at-risk college students (Rheinheimer, Grace-Odeleye, Francois, & Kusorgbor, 2010); community college students (Ugo, 2010); distance education students (Boyd, 2010; Dolan, Donohue, Holstrom, Pernell, & Sachdev, 2010); computer science students (Boyer, Phillips, Wallils, Vouk, Lester, & Boyer, 2009); and college students from historically underrepresented backgrounds (Walters, 2008).

Further, research has shown that one of the key reasons why tutoring has such a positive impact on student success is because it fosters social integration through the creation of a supportive relationship between the tutor and tutee (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 1997). As Bogart and Hirshberg (1993) wrote, tutors help improve retention rates, not only because they offer academic assistance, but also because they allow for the "creation of a

community of relationships and bonds for the students" (p. 3).

Clearly, tutors serve an important academic and social role which can lead to student success. Yet, while the relationship between tutors and tutees has been shown to be important, little is known about how tutors use communication to establish this critical bond which can have such an important effect on academic success (Maxwell, 1994).

As a result, even though professional objectives may be established, this lack of understanding can lead to confusion regarding how individuals should adopt the tutor role (Thonus, 1998; Topping, 1996; Wood, 1998). As Falchikov (2001) wrote, "Defining the role of peer tutor is very difficult, and getting tutors to understand the role themselves is, perhaps, an even more perplexing problem. Peer tutors are often defined by what they are not" (p. 4). One way to better understand how roles develop within the university tutoring setting is by considering the communication patterns that come to define the tutor-tutee relationship.

### **Relational Communication and the University Tutor Role**

A relational perspective on communication suggests that the reciprocal nature of communication between individuals builds a relational dynamic, shapes one's sense of self, and leads to the identification of unique roles. This perspective on communication took root at the start of the twentieth century with Cooley's (1902) claim that a relationship is necessary for a sense of self. Cooley's idea of the "looking-glass self" describes how individuals perceive themselves according to the way that they assume others perceive them. The idea that social relationships affect an individual's sense of self was advanced by Heider's (1958) dyadic communication research which found that people often look for cues from other individuals that will help them to gauge appropriate, acceptable, or congruent actions.

Such cues are manifest in different types of communicated messages. Bateson (1958) established that conversations contain both content and relational messages, and include relational questioning, content questioning, content explaining, and relational disclosure. Relational questioning focuses on questions designed to achieve relational goals and that result in the questioner's listening to the solicited response. Content questioning is less personal in nature and involves questions designed to accomplish specific task-related goals. Content explaining involves the responses to questions designed with a task goal in mind, and typically involves the explanation or divulging of facts, data, or information. Finally, relational disclosure involves self-disclosure of a personal nature which accomplishes relational goals.

Duncan (1967) further supported the importance of relational communication, finding that people both define themselves and their relationship, with the relationship having just as powerful an effect on the individual as the individual has on the relationship. As Duncan (1967) wrote, people do not “relate then talk, they relate in talk” (p. 249).

In much the same way that relational communication has been found to be critical in self and relational definition, such communication also factors into the role creation process. Through the process of anticipatory socialization (Merton, 1957), individuals ascertain in advance the communication behaviors they should adopt, prior to moving into a new role. In the process, Goffman (1959) suggested, individuals act as either a solo actor or as a member of a team in which everyone works together in subconscious collusion to create appropriate roles for the relational dynamic.

As such, a relational perspective on communication suggests that individuals often do not receive explicit directions regarding how they ought to perform in a given role. Instead, individuals ascribe meaning through the frequent and implicit messages transmitted intentionally or unintentionally in all communication (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Such a perspective on human communication can lead to a better understanding of the interaction between tutors and tutees, and the way in which the tutor role develops through relational communication between the tutor and tutee. Because communication patterns within a relationship are critical to understanding interpersonal role creation (Millar & Rogers, 1976), it is possible to learn a great deal about the creation of the university tutor role by looking at what communication patterns exist in the tutor-tutee relationship.

## **Methods**

A combination of ethnographic observation and structured interviews were used to gather data from participants (Deal-Williams, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1995; Festinger, 1957; Fetterman, 1989). The use of qualitative methods, including ethnographic observations and interviews, is well established as an effective means for collecting data in social science (Tsourvakas, 1997) and education research (Betaux, 1981; Seidman, 2006).

Ethnographic observation is useful in several ways, as it provides the opportunity to discover an idiographic knowledge that describes individual cases. Because ethnographic observation involves interacting with or observing the people being studied, the researcher has the opportunity to formulate his or her own conclusions based on first-hand experience (Soukap, 1999). Such a method is especially useful as it

allows a researcher to view a situation without having to see it through the filter of a participant's perspective. Further, by using direct participant observation, specific and detailed information can be obtained and recorded immediately. By directly observing the behaviors being studied, the researcher is also able to understand the meaning of a given behavior within the context where it actually occurred (Bernard, 2000).

Interviews are similarly useful, and allow researchers to gather additional explanations or details. As Fontana and Frey (1998) wrote, "Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings" (p. 47). Listening to individual accounts allows for the lived experiences of individuals to inform the researcher and potentially provide additional, rich insights into a particular environment or culture which might have otherwise been overlooked or not accurately recognized or reflected by another type of measure. As Seidman (2006) noted, interviews focus on letting people tell their stories, which allows them to express and reflect on their experiences. In the process of reflecting and selecting information, participants in the interview can draw on their lived experiences to make meaning from it, thus producing valuable data for consideration and analysis. As Bertaux (1981) wrote, "If given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on" (p. 39).

When designing the interview protocol for this study, care was taken to focus on what Lincoln and Guba (1985) termed qualitative trustworthiness: a qualitative-method substitute for quantitative-method measurement quality concerns. In order to address these concerns and identify problematic questions, two trial interviews were conducted. The trial interviews made it possible to identify and eliminate confusing questions, unclear phrasing, and problematic nonverbal cues and feedback. By making adjustments after the trial interviews, subsequent interviews were more consistent and reliable.

Regarding the ethnographic observations, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) identified several additional areas to address to ensure qualitative trustworthiness. First, Tashakkori and Teddlie suggest "prolonged engagement" in order to ensure that the investigator understands the culture of the environment being studied and is able to interpret the qualitative data that he or she gathers. By observing the same tutor-tutee pairs throughout an entire summer semester, sufficient time was spent within the tutoring sessions to understand the context of the behaviors that were observed. A second way to strengthen the trustworthiness of data is by providing a "thick description" of data. Accordingly, this study provides detailed description including portions of observation and interview transcripts.

A final threat to the validity of qualitative research includes the concern that participants can lie or withhold information. As Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) suggested, concerns about participant deception within an interview are often dependent on (a) the familiarity and comfort level between the researcher and participant, and (b) whether or not the topic is one the participants feel comfortable discussing. These concerns are minimized in this study because (a) by spending a full summer semester with each tutor-tutee pair, a sense of comfort developed; and (b) the topic under consideration is primarily professional in nature, and does not deal with personal topics.

### **Procedure**

Participants for this study were selected from a four-year public university in Pennsylvania. After obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board, a list of tutor-tutee pairs for the summer semester was obtained. Email invitations were sent to each pair, and volunteer participants responded to the email invitation and signed an informed consent form. From the list of volunteer participants, one tutor and one tutee were randomly selected for trial interviews. All other participant pairs were included in the data set ( $N=10$ ).

After completing the trial interviews and making adjustments to the interview protocol, the five tutor-tutee pairs were observed in tutoring sessions during the six-week summer semester. Immediately following the week six observation, structured interviews were conducted with tutors ( $n$  of items = 17) and tutees ( $n$  of items = 15), in order to gather more information regarding the behaviors observed within the tutoring sessions.

Next, audio recordings of the tutoring sessions and interviews were transcribed. A close reading of interview transcripts, tutoring session transcripts, and ethnographic field notes led to the identification of several emergent themes related to tutor communication behaviors. After identifying preliminary themes, transcripts were read a second time to determine which themes were addressed most commonly and at greatest length by the participants. These prevalent themes were used to form conclusions regarding the nature of the tutor role that develops through communication patterns. All names of participants were changed to ensure confidentiality.

### **Results**

Over the course of the study, several key tutor communication behaviors became apparent which fulfilled both content and relational goals (Bateson, 1958). These communication behaviors fell into four categories: relational questioning, content questioning, content explaining, and relational disclosure.

### Relational Questioning

Data from both observations and interviews suggest that tutor relational questioning was a communication behavior that tutors engaged in repeatedly. In fact, multiple tutors and tutees stated that personal interest was an element of their relationship. This shared recognition indicates that the relational element of the dialogue was important to both parties.

For instance, when asked if tutors engaged in relational dialogue and questioning, Mark, a tutee, said, "Yes. We talked a lot about where I was from and what I liked to do with my free time." Another tutee, Stephanie, said, "Yes, he seemed interested in what I said. He would ask questions about stuff." Similarly, Jessica, a tutor, said:

I did try to take a personal interest in my tutees. I started each session by chatting with them about their weekends, their other classes, life in general. . . . I tried to learn about them, their likes and dislikes, prospective majors, et cetera.

This relational dialogue referenced by Jessica leads to tutee self disclosure. However, while tutors like Jessica stressed their interest in asking relational questions which prompt the tutee to share personal information, tutors did not state that they ever felt the need to engage in reciprocal personal disclosure.

Thus, it is clear from these responses that, when asked, both tutors and tutees indicated that personal disclosure on the part of the tutee appeared to be important and welcome, and that the tutor both asked questions and listened attentively to the responses.

An exchange between one tutor, Phil, and tutee, Stephanie, demonstrates the way in which tutors ask a steady stream of questions to elicit personal disclosure and, in the process, develop a relationship. In this conversation, Phil notices pictures that Stephanie has attached to her binder.

Phil: *So, what's up? Who are the pictures of? Is that your sister?*

Stephanie: *Yeah, this here is my sister.*

Phil: *Is she older or younger?*

Stephanie: *She's my twin!*

Phil: *Wow, how about that. Let's see.*

Stephanie: *Yup.*

Phil: *So, how are you enjoying yourself here?*

Stephanie: *OK. It's fine. It is only the second day, though.*

Phil: *I see you have some post-it notes there.*

Stephanie: *Yeah, what I do is I put my notes for myself on here about what I have to do. My assignments.*

Phil: *A little strategy there. That's good.*

Stephanie: *Yeah.*

Phil: *So, who is your roommate?*

Stephanie: *Tracey. Do you know her?*

Phil: *Ahh, Tracey. Sure, I tutor her also.*

Stephanie: *Oh, OK.*

Phil: *How is it getting to know her and stuff?*

Stephanie: *I already knew her. We're from the same school.*

Phil: *Oh? Where is that?*

Stephanie: *Carteville.*

Phil: *That's around here, right?*

Stephanie: *Yeah.*

In this dialogue, Phil makes 11 separate comments, of which seven are direct questions, one is a request to see the tutee's photo, one is an observation of the tutee's personal belongings, and one is a commendation. At only one point does Phil shift the focus of the conversation away from the tutee: when he divulges only the most superficial information about himself, namely, that he tutors the tutee's roommate as well. The rest of the time, the tutor is devoted to encouraging the tutee to self-disclose, either by asking questions, commending her actions, or showing interest. Thus, both observation and interview data demonstrate the importance of relational questioning to the tutor-tutee relationship.

### **Content Questioning**

The second tutor communication behavior involves content questioning, or asking the tutees specific questions about their school-related assignments. Frequently, this behavior is designed to help tutees reach conclusions independently through a deductive process. All tutors identified some type of work-related conversation within their regular tutoring sessions. For instance, Kathleen, a tutor, said, "I ask them what they went over in class that day." Similarly, Sarah, a tutor, said, "I first ask what the tutee wants to go over."

This behavior was demonstrated in a conversation between Sarah, a tutor, and Matt, a tutee. In this situation, Sarah attempts to help Matt reach the correct understanding of a word he uses in his paper. Instead of telling Matt the definition, Sarah attempts to draw the correct understanding out of the tutee with a series of questions.

Sarah: *Take this sentence. It's kind of awkward. How would you rephrase that?*

Matt: *Maybe I could say, "Joking makes me feel good?"*

Sarah: *OK, yeah. How about thinking about how you feel when people are telling jokes. Describe what you mean. How do you feel when someone is joking around?*

Matt: *Oh, I, um, like a warm feeling. A good, warm feeling.*

Sarah: *A warm feeling. I like that. It sounds nice.*

Matt: *Yeah.*

Sarah: *Give me more though.*

Matt: *I don't know. Enthused?*

Sarah: *Yeah.*

Matt: *Ecstasy.*

Sarah: *OK. So, when people make you laugh, how do you feel?*

Matt: *Good.*

Sarah: *Ha, ha! Come on.*

Matt: *OK, I feel wonderful.*

Sarah: *Use those wonderful words.*

Matt: *OK.*

Sarah: *Now, what does ecstasy mean?*

Matt: *Joy. Happiness.*

Sarah: *I see joy here, and happiness down here. But ecstasy is way up here! Ha, ha! I don't feel that good when something is humorous. Do you?*

Matt: *No, I guess not. So maybe I should say pleasure or joy?*

Sarah: *OK.*

In this dialogue, Sarah continually uses questions to direct the conversation towards achieving content-related goals. Sarah asks Matt questions to keep him on track, and to help him reach conclusions on his own. Again, data from both interviews and tutoring sessions demonstrate the importance of tutor questioning within the tutoring relationship.

### **Content Explaining**

The third communication behavior on the part of tutors is that of content explaining. While this behavior occurs from time to time, it is notable that there are very few references to this type of behavior in the interviews. Both tutors and tutees rarely bring up this type of activity on the part of the tutors, thus indicating that this activity was not a prominent type of behavior that they were experiencing. Even when talking about their communication patterns, tutors spoke more about what the tutee said than what they said, thus further de-emphasizing the portion of the conversation that comes from the tutor. For instance, Sarah, a tutor, said:

*The schoolwork is mainly what we cover, but sometimes we need examples to prove certain points. Personal examples are needed to help the student to open up. He talks about sports, his parents, his friends, what he does in his free time, etc., etc.*

Here, Sarah shifts from discussing what “we” (tutor and tutee) talk about to what “he” (tutee) talks about. Similarly, examples of observed tutor answering were much less frequent and much shorter in duration than tutor questioning.

One rare instance of a sustained period of tutor explaining occurred in the tutoring session with Sarah and Matt. In this situation, Sarah, a tutor, and Matt, a tutee, are discussing study skills. Sarah volunteers information and talks for a relatively extended period without asking questions. In this situation, Sarah is in an instructional mode of conversation, explaining necessary behaviors and attitudes while only asking questions, fostering dialogue, or eliciting responses to a very limited extent.

Matt: *I paid attention well in class and asked questions when I needed to, I just never studied.*

Sarah: *OK.*

Matt: *Sometimes look over my notes. Like so I see what I don't know and what I do need to know.*

Sarah: *So it looks like you have an idea of what you need to do to study. You need more planning. With reading and writing, you need to plan because you can't write it or read it all just quickly before class.*

Matt: *But it's hard because, like, I don't know what is on the test or not on the test.*

Sarah: *Yes, I've talked about that with another student. You can look at the key topics in a book, highlight key terms. You might highlight or jot notes down for yourself. Are you a visual note taker? Or hear things the first time?*

Matt: *A little of both.*

Sarah: *OK, a blend. That's good. A visual thing too, that is good. Also as you are reading through your text you might want to jot down some notes.*

Matt: *Especially speech class. There is so much going on in there.*

Sarah: *Especially come speech time.*

Matt: *Definitely, definitely.*

Sarah: *Reading has a lot of tests and a lot of note taking skills. So if you keep on top of that. Finish up your assignments before you go out partying at night, and keep on top of things and you will be OK. The biggest problem I see . . . is that people start out in the first week and they keep on top of things, but by the second week they let things go, won't read a few assignments. Then by the third week you're in a hole trying to dig out.*

Matt: *Yeah.*

Sarah: *Keep on top of it.*

Matt: *I don't want to get ahead of myself though.*

Sarah: *That's true, but this week you have a couple of reading assignments. If you read them all today, you have them done for the week and they will still be pretty fresh in your*

*mind. Or if you have a three-day weekend, use that time to read a little ahead.*

While this dialogue between Sarah and Matt demonstrates tutor explaining, such a communication style was an exception. In most cases, tutor instruction is sandwiched between the much more common tutor-based questions. Indeed, at those times when the tutor does end up explaining specific content-related matters, the conversation typically begins and ends with tutor questions, and has only a brief portion in the middle where the tutor explains. Again, it can be seen that tutor content explaining does occur within the tutor/tutee relationship. However, as is evidenced both by transcripts of the tutoring sessions and interviews, such behavior happens only rarely.

### **Relational Disclosure**

Tutor relational disclosure also occurred only upon rare occasions. Throughout the interviews, tutors almost exclusively developed relational discourse focused on promoting tutee self-disclosure. Only rarely did tutors mention that they were comfortable sharing personal details. Sarah, the most experienced of the tutors, elaborated on how she intentionally avoids personal disclosure and sometimes even makes up fictional stories to fill conversational voids in order to avoid sharing personal information. Sarah said:

*What's funny is that I try not to incorporate my own personal life. I am not a very sharing person. I see over 300 new people a year and do not want my personal life displayed to all of those people.*

While not all tutors were quite as concerned about hiding details of their personal life from the tutee, others similarly noted their hesitance to disclose personal information. Jessica said, "We also talked some about their families, friends, majors, or intended careers. . . . We ended up talking about their personal life more than mine." Similarly, Phil said:

*On a personal level, we'd talk about their musical interests and favorite movies. . . . We would spend time, whenever they felt it necessary, talking about their home, school, roommates, relationships, fears, worries. I feel that I covered a lot of personal ground over the course of three semesters of tutoring here. . . . Occasionally I would tell a little bit about myself, family, travels, et cetera, but only occasionally.*

Both observations and interviews show that tutors either completely avoid personal disclosure or only discuss the most superficial personal matters on an infrequent basis. The guarded nature of tutors was apparent in an interaction in which Matt, a tutee, asks to look at photographs from the wedding of his tutor, Sarah.

Sarah: *You've got your study guide, right?*

Matt: *Yeah, we got one. Hey, can I see your pictures?*

Sarah: *Not till we're done. Wait till we're done. Think of it as a present.*

Matt: *Awww.*

Sarah and Matt then proceed through the tutoring session. Approximately 25 minutes later, as Matt is getting ready to leave, the topic of Sarah's pictures arises again. However, Sarah is very brief and shows Matt only a few pictures quickly as he leaves.

Sarah: *Well, I think that you are going to be needing to do a lot of writing yet. And I have a feeling you will have more to do in any job you're going to get to.*

Matt: *OK, OK!*

Sarah: *Here are my pictures. I love black and white pictures.*

Matt: *Yea. My friend likes black and white pictures. Well, congratulations.*

Sarah: *And congratulations for finishing tutoring.*

Matt: *Thanks.*

Sarah: *See you in the fall.*

Matt: *I hope not! Ha, ha!*

Sarah: *What? You better not mean it.*

Matt: *I do.*

Sarah: *No.*

Matt: *OK, I'm kidding. See ya.*

As evidenced by both observations and interviews, tutors typically avoid self-disclosure, and instead attempt to redirect the conversation to focus on the tutee whenever possible.

## Discussion

Previous research has established that a tutor's effectiveness is largely based on his or her ability to provide both a personal connection and academic support (Bogart & Hirshberg, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Pascarella et al., 1986; Tinto, 1997). This study's findings similarly suggest the importance of both content and relational goals in the tutoring relationship. Additionally, this study builds on existing research by highlighting specific communication behaviors which tutors engage in while working to establish the tutor-tutee relationship.

First, the most observable communication behavior of the tutor is as a questioner and listener. While these questions may be of either a relational or content orientation, it is clear from both observations and interviews that tutors ask questions throughout the tutoring sessions, and consider doing so to be an important part of their job. Because this type

of questioning and listening demonstrates friendly personal interest, it helps to foster the dialogue that is necessary for successful tutoring.

Second, both tutors and tutees avoid conversations in which tutor self-disclosure of a personal nature is required. While the tutees who were observed often answer personal questions, they avoid asking personal questions about the tutor. On the rare occasions when the tutee does ask personal questions of the tutor, the tutor often ignores the question, or sidesteps it by answering it briefly and then moving to a new topic. Thus, the tutoring sessions are tutee-centered, whether the topic of conversation is personal or content-related in nature. Because both tutor and tutee behaviors reinforce this attitude, it appears that the tutee-centered focus of tutoring is valued by all parties involved. As Jessica, a tutor, noted, tutors "help them [tutees] help themselves."

These two dominant communication behaviors also demonstrate the way in which power is negotiated within this relationship. Throughout the course of this study, the idea surfaced time and again that tutors and tutees both value the idea of having a relationship characterized by mutuality and equality. This type of relationship would be in contrast to the traditional teacher-student or professor-student relationship, in which the teacher or professor holds all of the formal referent power. However, even though both tutors and tutees value a non-hierarchical relationship, such a role structure is not actually created. Instead, tutors end up assuming a powerful position regardless of their intentions: tutees make themselves vulnerable by sharing while tutors refrain from sharing and, instead, only ask questions.

The typical pattern of a tutoring session demonstrates how this dynamic occurs. Tutors strive for an equal-power relationship by asking questions in order to prompt student involvement in a dialogue. However, by initiating this discourse, tutors actually reinforce the very hierarchical role they are trying to avoid. Thus, tutors are caught in a paradox. The very behaviors designed to create equality actually result in a friendly, but distinctly hierarchical relationship (Millar & Rogers, 1987; Rogers & Farace, 1975; Rogers-Millar & Millar, 1979). Further, on the rare occasions when tutors do self-disclose, it results in discomfort: tutees do not ask follow up questions, and tutors shift back to questioning behaviors.

### **Limitations**

This study offers new information regarding the nature of communication patterns between tutors and tutees. Yet, there are some limitations associated with this research. First, while ethnographic observations and interviews yield descriptive data, the time-intensive nature of these methods meant that the sample size included in this study was limited.

Second, all participants were drawn from just one tutoring center at one university. Accordingly, this study's research design intentionally limited its breadth, in order to provide more depth of analysis, and a more detailed and comprehensive picture. Yet, it lacks the generalizability that could be obtained by sampling participants from numerous colleges and universities.

Future research could consider a larger sample size and analyze both tutor and tutee behaviors at multiple universities. However, future research need not be limited to repeating the same procedure on a larger scale. Instead, the themes identified in this study can be used as a foundation for further investigation. For instance, having identified the unintentionally hierarchal nature of the tutor-tutee relationship, new research could focus specifically on the power dynamics between tutors and tutees. Future research can also consider tutee communication behaviors that occur in response to each categorical theme of tutor communication. Such new research could allow for an even more holistic understanding of the communication patterns within the tutor-tutee relationship.

## Conclusion

The role of a tutor is unique, and involves exhibiting the friendliness of a friend, the inspiration of a mentor, the strength of an authority figure, and the knowledge of an instructor. But a tutor is neither a friend, a mentor, an authority figure, nor an instructor. Instead, a tutor has a distinct role which is defined, not by formal guidelines, but by the patterns of communication in which he or she engages. By understanding the way in which tutors and tutees engage in interpersonal communication patterns, it is possible to better understand and define this unique role. Once this role is better understood, tutors can work to develop these critical communication competencies which will ultimately allow them to build a connection which allows for increased student success.

## References

- Bateson, G. (1958). *Naven, a survey of the problems suggested by a composite picture of the culture of a New Guinea tribe drawn from three points of view*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bertaux, D. (Ed.) (1981). *Biography and society: The life history approach in the social sciences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Bogart, M., & Hirshberg, R. (1993). *A holistic approach to student retention*. Paper presented at the Annual Regional Reading and Study Skills Conference.
- Boyd, V. (2010). *The retention factor: Retaining the distance education learner*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Proquest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 2091837931)

- Boyer, K. E., Phillips, R., Wallis, M. D., Vouk, M. A., & Lester, J. C. (2009). Investigating the role of student motivation in computer science education through one-on-one tutoring. *Computer Science Education, 19*(2), 111-135.
- Cohen, P. A., Kulik, J. A., & Kulik, C. C. (1982). Education outcomes of tutoring: A meta-analysis of findings. *American Education Research Journal, 19*(2), 237-248.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York, NY: Scribner's.
- Deal-Williams, V. (2003). What is ethnography? *ASHA Leader, 8*(5), 14-19.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1995). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dolan, S., Donohue, C., Holstrom, L., Pernel, L., & Sachdev, A. (2010). Supporting online learners: Blending high-tech with high-touch. *Exchange, 190*, 90-94.
- Duncan, H. D. (1967). The search for a social theory of communication in American sociology. In F. Dance (Ed.), *Human communication theory*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Elbaum, B., Vaughn, S., Hughes, M. T., & Moody, S. W. (2000). How effective are one-to-one tutoring programs in reading for elementary students at risk for reading failure? A meta-analysis of the intervention research. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92*(4), 605-619.
- Ellison, D. G. (1976). Tutoring. In N. L. Gage (Ed.), *The psychology of teaching methods*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Erion, J. (2006). Parent tutoring: A meta-analysis. *Education & Treatment of Children, 29*(1), 79-106.
- Falchikov, N. (2001). *Learning together: Peer tutoring in higher education*. London: Routledge.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Fetterman, D. M. (1989). *Ethnography: Step by step*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. (1998). Interviewing: The art of science. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 47-78). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Kulik, C. C., Kulik, J. A., & Shwalb, B. J. (1983). College programs for high-risk and disadvantaged students: A meta-analysis of findings. *Review of Educational Research, 53*(3), 397-414.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, M. (1994). Does tutoring help? A look at the literature. In M. Maxwell (Ed.), *From access to success* (pp. 109-115). Clearwater, FL: H&H Publishing.
- McKellar, N. A. (1986). Behaviors used in peer tutoring. *Journal of Experimental Education, 54*, 158-169.
- Millar, F., & Rogers, E. (1987). Relational dimensions of interpersonal dynamics. In M. Roloff & G. Miller (Eds.), *Interpersonal processes: New direction in communication research* (pp. 117-139). New York, NY: Sage.
- Millar, F., & Rogers, E. (1976). A relational approach to interpersonal communication. In G. R. Miller (Ed.), *Explorations in interpersonal communication* (pp. 87-105). Oxford: Sage.

- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1983). Predicting voluntary freshman year persistence/withdrawal behavior in a residential university: A parth analytic validation of Tinto's model. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 75*(2), 215-226.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1986). Orientations to college and freshman year persistence/withdrawal decisions. *Journal of Higher Education, 57*(2), 156-175.
- Pascarella, E., Terenzini, P., & Wolfe, L. (1986). Orientation to college and freshman year persistence/withdrawal decisions. *Journal of Higher Education, 57*, 155 - 175.
- Rheinheimer, D. C., Grace-Odeleye, B., Francois, G. E., & Kusorgbor, C. (2010). Tutoring: A support strategy for at-risk students. *The Learning Assistance Review, 15*(1), 23-34.
- Rogers, L. E., & Farace, R. V. (1975). Analysis of relational communication in dyads: New measurement procedures. *Human Communication Research, 1*, 222-239.
- Rogers-Millar, L. E., & Millar, F. (1979). Domineeringness and dominance: A transactional view. *Human Communication Research, 5*, 238-246.
- Rohrbeck, C. A., Ginsburg-Block, M. D., Fantuzzo, J. W., & Miller, T. R. (2003). Peer assisted learning interventions with elementary school students: a metal-analytic review. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(2), 240-257.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Soukup, C. (1999). The gendered interactional patterns of computer-mediated chatrooms: A critical ethnographic study. *The Information Society: An International Journal, 15*, 169-176.
- Thonus, T. (1998). *How to communicate politely and be a tutor, too: NS-NNS interaction and writing center practice*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Seattle, WA. Retrieved from [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/29/bd/92.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/29/bd/92.pdf)
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 68*(6), 599-623.
- Topping, K. J. (1996). The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: a typology and review of the literature. *Higher Education, 32*(3), 341-356.
- Tsourvakas, G. (1997). Multi-visual qualitative method: Observing social groups in mass media. *The Qualitative Report, 3*(3). Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-3/tsour.html>
- Ugo, A. N. (2010). *The relationship between tutoring and student success*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from Proquest Dissertation and Theses database. (UMI No. 2088566991)
- Walters, N. (2008). *Intervention for college attendance program: 2007-2008 report*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Office of Higher Education.
- Wood, D. (1998). Social interaction as tutoring. In P. Llodry & C. Fernyhough (Eds.), *Lev Vygotsky: Critical assessments* (pp. 282-306). New York, NY: Routledge.

---

**Hans C. Schmidt** (Ph.D., Temple University) is an assistant professor of communications at Pennsylvania State University, Brandywine. His recent research has focused on communication and media education. He can be contacted at [hcs10@psu.edu](mailto:hcs10@psu.edu).