

Engaging Students as Tutors, Trainers, and Leaders

One of the greatest joys for teachers is to be able to inspire a love of teaching in their own students. Having students tutor other students is one way to accomplish this. A well-planned and carefully organized tutoring program can lead to remarkable gains for tutors, tutees, and teachers.

While starting a tutoring program may seem like a daunting and time-consuming task, it does not have to be. The best way to approach the creation and development of a tutoring service is with a list of clear objectives. In this article, I describe the process I used to create a tutoring program with my English as a foreign language university students. I identify questions that need to be addressed at each step of the program development process, then explain how my student tutors and I answered these questions.

The answers that shaped the final program were specific to our situation and location; however, if I had been in another location with different students and resources, the same questions would have led to different answers—and a different program. But it would have been a program tailor-made to fit the needs of the student tutors and the tutees. Thus, the only “right” answers to these questions are the ones that are “right” for each teacher’s time, place, and students.

WHAT IS TUTORING?

It is perhaps best to begin by looking at an explanation of what tutoring is and what benefits it provides to both the tutors and their tutees. Peer tutoring, also known as

peer-assisted learning, is defined as “the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (Topping and Ehly 1998, 1). It can incorporate everything from teaching, mentoring, and counseling to behavior modeling. Much of the research on peer tutoring is overwhelmingly positive (National Tutoring Association 2002). Peer tutoring has been studied in multiple settings and with many types, ages, and levels of learners, including (but not limited to) children, teenagers, second-language learners, and autistic learners. It has been studied with a variety of subjects, from biology and mathematics to physical education.

The positive benefits are numerous and significant. Topping and Ehly (1998) note that “tutors can learn to be nurturing toward their tutees, and in so doing, develop a sense of pride and responsibility” (4) and that improved motivation and attitude can lead to “greater commitment, improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and greater empathy with others” (13–14).

But tutoring leads to gains in more than self-esteem and empathy, important as these are. Research indicates that students who tutor others also make significant academic gains

Tutors can be almost any age, from primary school up, and they can come from a variety of disciplines.

(National Tutoring Association 2002; Topping and Ehly 1998; Galbraith and Winterbottom 2011; Fantuzzo et al. 1989; National Education Association 2014).

In their study of peer tutoring, Galbraith and Winterbottom (2011) report that “tutors’ perceptions of their role motivated them to learn the material, and their learning was supported by discussion and explanation, revisiting fundamentals, making links between conceptual areas, testing and clarifying their understanding, and reorganizing and building ideas, rehearsing them, and working through them repeatedly, to secure their understanding” and that “mental rehearsal of peer-tutoring episodes helped them appreciate weaknesses in their own subject knowledge” (321).

It is important to be aware that, while this article focuses on a program that was created to provide teaching experience to pre-service English teachers, *anyone* can tutor—and *anyone* can be tutored. Tutors can be almost any age, from primary school up, and they can come from a variety of disciplines. Ten-year-olds can tutor six-year-olds. Biology students can tutor others in biology. Accountants can tutor in business. The benefits to tutors and tutees are similar regardless of the field in which they are working.

HOW TO DEVELOP A TUTORING PROGRAM

The following seven steps serve as a guide to plan, develop, and initiate a successful tutoring program.

Step 1: Determine the needs of both the tutees and tutors and design a program that meets them

My first questions were about the tutees, the people my students would tutor. I needed to determine the following:

- Who (and how old) will the tutees be?

- Do they need homework help, conversation practice, assistance in writing, or listening practice?

At this stage in the process, it is essential to be aware of local beliefs about education. For example, although peer-tutoring programs are common in the United States, in the culture where I was teaching, university students are reluctant to accept instruction from their peers. Thus, it was best for my students to work with younger, school-aged children who were learning English, and the program became a cross-age tutoring program focused on having tutors use communicative language teaching methodology to provide homework assistance.

Secondly, I had to think about who the tutors would be and what their own needs and goals were. I had to consider:

- What experience do the tutors need?
- Do they need opportunities to work with children, teenagers, adults—or learners of all ages?
- Do they need opportunities to lead classes or groups, or can they focus on one-on-one tutoring?

In my students’ cross-age tutoring program, they would be teaching children with a rather basic level of English. Would this be enough to push their own development of English? Kunsch, Jitendra, and Sood (2007) note that cross-age tutoring, where students have different levels of expertise, is a successful approach. In addition, research on cross-age tutoring indicates that tutors working with younger learners experience gains similar to those of peer tutors in the areas of empathy, confidence, and self-esteem (Yogev and Ronen 1982; Hill and Grieve 2011). Tutors still need to understand English well enough to

explain it clearly to younger learners, even if they are using the students' first language. In fact, clarity of explanation would be vital, as children have fewer metacognitive or coping strategies to resort to if they do not understand something.

My next question was, "Who should tutor?" I did not want to make being a tutor mandatory for all my students. I also wanted the service to be free for the children, meaning that the tutoring would not generate any income and that I would not pay my tutors for their work.

Tutors do not need to be experts in what they are tutoring; they can be in the process of learning the material.

I also asked myself what criteria I should set for selecting my tutors. Should I allow only my students with the highest levels of English to tutor? What role should a student's responsibility, motivation, and initiative play in my decision regarding who should tutor? In the end, I opened the program to all my students and presented it as a unique volunteer opportunity that would look impressive on a curriculum vitae (CV). I also talked to students about the benefits of tutoring—how it would not only give them teaching practice, but also help them improve their English.

It is important to remember that tutors do not need to be experts in what they are tutoring; they can be in the process of learning the material. After my tutors had been tutoring for several months, I asked them what qualities a tutor should have. They responded that tutors should be interested in helping people, open to learning about their tutees and trying different techniques and ways to connect with them, and able to explain difficult concepts in simple, easy-to-understand language. Even the tutors themselves recognized that it is not necessary for an effective tutor to have advanced English proficiency.

Step 2: Consider what resources are available

Try to answer the "who," "what," "where," and "when" questions about available resources to identify what you have and do not have. Some things to consider include:

- Who is available to observe and assist the tutors and provide feedback?
- What books and materials are available for the tutors to use?
- What other resources (e.g., computers, whiteboards, markers, desks, classrooms, Internet access) are available?
- Where can the tutoring sessions be held?
- When is the best time to hold the tutoring service?

For a new program, the ideal situation is one where the program can build on the popularity of a similar service. In our case, the local American Center was already offering English conversation classes to school-age children on Saturday afternoons, so it made perfect sense to arrange our tutoring service to coincide with their classes so that children could come early, receive homework help, and then stay for their conversation class. The American Center staff found a room to use for the tutoring and also made announcements to the children in their conversation classes.

Of course, not all teachers are as lucky as I happened to be—but, as my tutors became fond of telling people, all you really need for a successful tutoring session are a tutee, a pencil, and some paper. Tutoring can happen in any space and at any time. The most important aspect is the interaction between tutor and tutee, and that can happen anywhere.

One extremely important resource is other teachers who might be interested in helping develop and run a tutoring program and providing support to tutors. In fact, a group of teachers can divide the various tasks

of recruiting tutors, training tutors, and advertising the program. But even if there are no other teachers who are available to help set up and run a program, as the tutors become more experienced, they will be able to take on more and more responsibilities. In fact, this model worked well for us because it helped the tutors become self-sufficient and built their confidence and self-esteem.

Also, as the tutors became more experienced, they were able to develop their own materials. After a few months, there was a cabinet full of teaching aids that the tutors had collected or created on their own initiative.

Step 3: Develop a training program that is tailored to the context

Again, look at who the tutors are, who the tutees will be, and the type of tutoring program you are planning. Different situations will require different information in training sessions to reflect the needs of the tutors. Skills-focused tutoring (such as writing, speaking, reading, or listening tutoring) will require different training than tutoring focused on providing homework help. Training can include information on any of the following areas, among others:

- methods of language teaching
- classroom management and behavior management
- child psychology and development
- error correction
- learning preferences and communication styles

Although creating a training packet can be a time-consuming task, it needs to be done only once, and teachers developing a training packet can ask other teachers for their input and assistance. In developing a tutor-training program, teachers can mine numerous resources available on the Internet and in teaching methodology books as they search for training materials. The Internet

resources listed in the Appendix can help. Some of the resources listed (for example, the Anoka-Ramsey Community College Tutor Training link) are complete tutor-training modules including readings and assignments. Teachers who have limited time to create a tutor-training program from scratch can have their tutors complete the training modules from this site or others. Again, the approach depends on the needs of the teachers, tutors, and tutees, and on the resources available. Personal teaching experience can also be part of the training materials; in fact, it might be the most valuable of all resources. An experienced tutor can be treated as a resource and should be encouraged to share tips and techniques with new tutors.

The training packet that I created contained lessons on effective tutoring techniques, communication skills (including active listening), and ways to correct errors. Because finding time for training sessions was difficult, tutors were required to complete the training packets outside the training sessions by working with a partner. Each training session consisted of a review of the work the tutors had done, and the last ten minutes were used to set up the next tasks and answer questions about them. The system worked, especially when the tutors realized that if they did not complete the tasks, they would not be allowed to work as tutors.

The most important parts of any tutor-training program include practice tutoring, observations, and tutor self-reflection. Teachers should provide new tutors with the opportunity to practice tutoring, preferably with more-experienced tutors; teachers should also observe new tutors at least once and invite tutors to reflect on what went well (and what they could improve) in their tutoring sessions.

Step 4: Recruit and train tutors

This step goes back to the question of who the tutors will be. It is not always necessary that tutors be pedagogy students; remember, they will be provided with the necessary training for successful tutoring. In terms of the hiring

process, questions to consider include the following:

- Should prospective tutors submit CVs and/or undergo interviews?
- What are the specific hiring criteria?
- What level of English do the tutors need to have?
- What other criteria will there be in terms of responsibility, maturity, and communication skills?

I wanted to make the tutoring service as professional as possible and to emphasize the importance of making a commitment. Thus, I required that students submit a CV if they were interested in being tutors. How to write a CV was something we had studied in class, and therefore asking potential tutors to submit CVs was a practical extension of that lesson. I also asked them to write a letter of motivation explaining why they wanted to be tutors. When selecting tutors, I focused on students' level of interest in tutoring, interpersonal skills, and awareness of what tutoring is and what would be expected of them. Of course, while I considered these qualities to be important for the program I was starting, each program will be different, and thus the criteria for tutors should be different. Ultimately, the criteria for tutors will depend on the program objectives. Motivation, however, is an important quality for program success and sustainability.

Step 5: Advertise the tutoring program

After the tutors have been recruited and trained, it is time to advertise the tutoring program. Work with the tutors to spread the word about the program. Tutors can develop flyers and promotional materials. They can also contact local schools and universities, local English teachers, and English teacher associations; post information about the tutoring service on Facebook and other forms of social media; and encourage people to tell their friends and relatives.

Again, here is where it is useful, when possible, to build connections with other services that are already well known. Initial advertising can be conducted through word of mouth, which was what we did. Once the tutors became experienced, they wanted to advertise the program to a wider audience, and they created a trilingual brochure that included a map showing our tutoring location. They distributed the brochure to parents, English teachers, and children.

Of course, in advertising a free tutoring service for children, there is a danger that demand will outstrip the number of available tutors. When we faced this problem, the tutors took a vote and decided to extend their hours. They also decided to recruit and train additional tutors.

Step 6: Begin the sessions

After recruiting and training, we were ready to start. At this stage, observation, supervision, and feedback are critical to building a strong program. This is worth emphasizing, even if only one teacher is available to provide support to student tutors.

For our first tutoring session, I had the tutors work in pairs, with one tutor doing the actual tutoring and the other observing the session. After the tutoring hour ended, I invited the tutors to share their experiences, observations, and comments and suggestions.

The next tutoring sessions went extremely well. As my tutors worked with the children, I walked around and observed, making notes so that I could offer praise and suggestions. After each tutoring hour, the tutors and I would meet and discuss the sessions as a group. After several sessions, I encouraged the tutors to write a list of rules that would help them deal with the situations that they had encountered. One rule that the tutors felt was important was that parents had to wait outside the tutoring room (otherwise, the parents had a tendency to try to control the tutoring session). Tutors also agreed upon a strict first-come, first-served rule.

Step 7: Expand the program and build self-sustainability

One of the most exciting aspects of a tutoring program is that it provides tutors with opportunities to become leaders and coordinators. A tutoring program will be self-sustainable if tutors take on the responsibility of running and promoting the program, recruiting and hiring new tutors, training new tutors, and continuing to provide feedback to each other. Think about what “officers” are needed to run the tutoring program. Should there be an attendance coordinator? A recruiting and training coordinator? A general coordinator?

Sustainability and growth are important parts of any tutoring program and should be considered even while the program is first being developed. In our situation, I wanted to ensure that the tutors would have the skills and knowledge they would need in order to run the service without me. Also, the majority of my students had never been given any opportunities to lead. I saw in several of my tutors the potential to successfully take on greater responsibility for the program, so I divided the work I was doing for the tutoring service into separate leadership roles and wrote descriptions for each. I decided that the service would need the following: an attendance coordinator to track both tutor and schoolchild attendance; a secretary to take notes at meetings, send out email notifications, and keep track of our resources; a community liaison to promote the service, write grants, and build relationships with local teacher groups; and two hiring and training coordinators.

When the tutors returned from winter break, we held elections to select their new leaders. I immediately gave a stack of new CVs to the hiring coordinators, and we discussed criteria for hiring new tutors. The experienced tutors took charge of hiring, training, and mentoring. The tutors expressed doubts about their readiness to completely take over the service, but as it turned out, they were more than capable of doing so. Six months after I left (and a full year after the tutoring service had begun), the tutors had 70 tutor applications, from which they hired 17 new tutors. As Aydan, one of the leaders of the

program, wrote, “Among the new tutors we have diplomats, translators, students from international relations, and others. They have so much desire to work, to help. I hope that this desire will stay with them for a long time.”

WHAT WE LEARNED

As a teacher, I learned that a tutoring program leads to previously undreamed-of opportunities for both teachers and tutors. For example, the tutors I worked with were invited to give a presentation at a conference of English teachers in a neighboring country. This conference was, for many of the tutors, the highlight of their tutoring experience. Several of them had never been out of their country before, and none had ever delivered a presentation outside their classes. And yet there they were, standing in front of more than 100 English teachers, talking about the work they had been doing as English tutors.

Although this exact opportunity might not be available to everyone, there will be others. One way to motivate tutors is to connect them to local English teachers’ associations. Perhaps tutors can volunteer at local conferences in exchange for the chance to attend the conferences for free. Tutors can organize classes, festivals, or field trips for their tutees—the possibilities are endless. The main thing is to search for and be open to new ideas and possibilities.

I recently asked my tutors what they had learned from their tutoring experience. While I had expected a positive response, I was taken aback by how much self-awareness and insight their responses showed. Without my having prompted them, several tutors mentioned the same benefits that the researchers cited above had found.

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One tutor, Sakina, in responding to my question, said, “Actually tutoring service is not that common in our home country, but implementing this project is really very useful for both the tutors and the students.” Another tutor, Aygul, said, “Tutoring allows you the opportunity to develop intellectually, psychologically, and personally. Tutors mature and gain self-confidence as they work. [...] It reinforced my ability to communicate clearly, logically, and creatively.”

Of course, we all learned the importance of remaining flexible, particularly in the early stages of the project. Tutors who were involved from the beginning were able to observe how such a program was designed and developed. Another lesson was the importance of using experienced tutors as resources—not only for hiring and training, but also for the

daily operations of the tutoring program and even in the creation of tutoring materials.

For myself, I learned that motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, is (almost) as good as money—though the tutors certainly looked forward to the baked goods and treats I would bring each week. And while there was one tutor who decided to stop tutoring due to family reasons, the other tutors stayed with the program all year. I attribute this dedication to the fact that they were all highly motivated and found the tutoring experience rewarding and enjoyable.

To help with tutor retention rates, I learned that it was important to provide additional support for tutors with weak language skills. In receiving this support, tutors felt more qualified to teach and at the same time

HOW TO START A TUTORING PROGRAM: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why am I starting a tutoring program? What do I hope to achieve?
2. What is the focus of the program (conversation, writing, homework help, etc.)?
3. Who are the tutors? What are their needs? Strengths? Weaknesses?
4. Who are the tutees? What are the tutees' needs?
5. What resources and materials will the tutors have available to them (books, Internet, computers, paper, etc.)? How and where can the program raise funds (grants, fund-raising, donations, etc.)?
6. What is the hiring and selection process for the tutors?
7. Where and when will the tutoring be conducted?
8. Who will be supervising and providing feedback to the tutors once they begin tutoring?
9. What should the training program consist of, and how should it be organized? How should the tutors be assessed to determine if they are qualified to tutor?
10. How will the tutoring program be advertised?
11. How can the program be made self-sustainable? How can the program be expanded?

Figure 1. A framework of questions to consider when starting a tutoring program

appreciated the opportunity to improve their English. As a tutor named Narmin said, “Tutors and tutees get benefits from this program. We tutors improve ourselves a lot. Sometimes we meet some words which we have forgotten, then we ask one another or look through a book. In this way we learn, too.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is my hope that in detailing the process that I went through, this article can serve as a guide to others who wish to create similar programs. Again, my goal is not that other teachers will create exact replicas of my program; rather, it is that others will use this article and the framework of questions to create their own individualized programs. The questions in Figure 1 can be used as a starting point for discussions with colleagues—and I highly recommend that English teachers work together to divide the work of starting a tutoring program. I have also included a list of online resources in the Appendix that can be consulted in order to create a personalized training manual for tutors in either a peer-tutoring or cross-age tutoring program.

Creating a tutoring program was hard work, and there were many challenges along the way, but the result was more than worth the amount of work that went into the program. The tutors have developed not only a love of teaching but also a greater sense of self-worth. They have come to see themselves as coordinators and leaders. The children who come for help look up to the tutors and often greet them with hugs and big smiles. The tutors take their responsibilities to these children very seriously. They have developed their own techniques for facing challenging situations, some of which reveal amazing insight into teaching and learning. The tutors feel comfortable experimenting with techniques, and they often make their children stand and move, or use colored markers, or sing songs, or watch and respond to short videos.

That the tutors embrace communicative and interactive teaching methodology is especially

impressive—and critical—in a society where rote memorization and teacher-centered classrooms are still the norm. Perhaps it is because they are still students themselves that they are able to connect so closely with the children they work with, but whatever the reason, these amazing young tutors all have bright futures as English teachers and as leaders.

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APPENDIX

Online Resources for Creating a Training Packet for Tutors

Peer Tutoring ... a proactive intervention for the classroom

www.cehd.umn.edu/ceed/publications/tipsheets/preschoolbehavior/peertutor.pdf

This is a brief, easy-to-read document that answers questions about how to begin and maintain a tutoring program. Although it is geared toward working with students with learning disabilities, the information applies to all types of tutoring.

Wellesley University Tutor Training Manual

[www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/pltc/files/tutors/PLTC%20](http://www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/pltc/files/tutors/PLTC%20Tutor%20Training%20Manual%2010-11.pdf)

[Tutor%20Training%20Manual%2010-11.pdf](http://www.wellesley.edu/sites/default/files/assets/departments/pltc/files/tutors/PLTC%20Tutor%20Training%20Manual%2010-11.pdf)

This manual documents the types of logistics and content necessary to run a tutoring program (although it perhaps contains more than what an English tutoring program would need).

Beginning on page 19, it discusses ways to make tutoring sessions successful, and beginning on page 55, it presents time-management skills.

Tamanawis Peer Tutor Training Manual

tamanawistutors.wordpress.com/documents/peer-tutor-training-manual

This is a slightly shorter manual that contains information on effective tutoring sessions, learning styles, and good listening strategies, among other things. Again, not all the information will be relevant to an English tutoring program, but the manual itself can serve as a model.

Anoka-Ramsey Community College Tutor Training

anokaramsey.mnscu.edu/tutor_training

This site contains ten interactive tutor-training modules, including “Introduction to Tutoring,” “Five Steps to Being Effective,” “Techniques That Work,” “Listening Skills,” and “Learning Styles.” Depending on the English level of the tutors, they could be directed to this site for specific self-study modules.

AmeriCorps’s Students Teaching Students: A Handbook for Cross-age Tutoring

<http://sbceo.org/~sbcsli/aHerczog.pdf>

This is a handbook for setting up a cross-age tutoring program. It is not intended to be given to tutors; rather, the information should be adapted for training tutors. It is particularly useful for younger tutors.