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A Tutoring Dialogue: From Workshop to Session

Cheryl Clark and Phyllis A. Sherwood

Peer tutoring can be a viable part of the writing lab or the classroom in both high school and college. Ideally, once tutors are selected, they should be able to enroll in a course, but in reality most high schools and colleges do not have such a course. An alternative is to offer a workshop of several short sessions to prepare them for tutoring. Training tutors in skills will obviously vary with the types of tutoring they are expected to do and the services the writing lab provides. How students are acquainted with the resources and trained to teach composing skills are problems that English teachers or writing lab directors are easily able to handle. However, we, as teachers, may sometimes forget the obvious. If tutors have not had courses in education or psychology, for example, they may lack knowledge of some principles of learning and of strategies that would enhance their ability to tutor. Training tutors in areas other than cognitive skills becomes a prerequisite to a successful program.

At Raymond Walters College, the directors of the writing, math, and reading labs, along with a counselor, hold a half day workshop for peer tutors before the fall quarter begins. Because Raymond Walters is a two-year college, we have a large turnover of peer tutors. Although our tutors are highly competent in their disciplines, they are all freshmen or sophomores, and we feel that they could benefit from some knowledge of theories of learning and education in order to be effective tutors. In addition, by video taping the workshop, we can orient new tutors who are hired during the year.

In this dialogue, I will describe some of the activities, theories, and information that are covered in the workshop. Then Cheryl will explain how knowledge she learned in the workshop was applied in actual tutoring sessions.

PHYLLIS: One workshop game is designed to help tutors become cognizant of affective learning factors—both in their own behavior and in that of the tutee. The game, called “Head Trip”, helps student tutors develop their sensitivity to feelings. Each person wears a head band with a different message on it which he or she has not seen. One might say, “Be gentle, I’m fragile,” others “I’ve had a bad day,” “Interrupt me when I speak,” “I feel wonderful,” “Touch me when I talk,” “Look at my shoes when you talk to me,” etc. Then workshop participants mingle, responding in their conversation to the message on the head band. At the end of this game, each person guesses what his or her head band said. The point of the game is that we all have unseen messages to which others will react, and we discuss the significance of these messages and ways to cope with attitudes as they relate to both learning and tutoring. This game heightens the tutors’ awareness of how their own or the tutee’s behavior and feelings might affect a tutoring session.

CHERYL: There is much truth in Phyllis’ statement that the game heightens awareness of how behavior and attitudes might affect tutoring sessions. I found that there were days when I really had to psyche myself up for a tutoring session—days when I was very anxious about an upcoming math test or when I was not feeling well or when I just plain didn’t want to be at school, period. I know that I had to get over these negative feelings, or at least cover them up temporarily if I wanted to be effective. I also found myself watching my tutees very closely as I explained a certain rule or as we discussed a concept or as they worked on written exercises. I learned to pick up the nonverbal signs that told me if the tutee didn’t understand or if he or she was mentally over in the Campus Center or if the tutee just didn’t care about learning the material. I also learned to listen to the tone of the tutee’s voice because the tone of the voice would sometimes clue me in to attitudes and feelings.

PHYLLIS: Another segment of the workshop deals with learning factors. Tutors participate in an exercise which helps them understand the three different learning styles: audio, visual, and tactile. First the tutors are asked to draw a simple figure as a group leader gives oral directions. Next, tutors are given written directions on how to draw a figure and asked to follow those directions. Finally, they are asked to describe in writing or to draw a familiar object which they can feel but not see. The objects can be placed in bags or put in their hands behind their backs. After each segment of this exercise, the tutors compare their results.

The tutors learn that some prefer hearing directions read while others perform much better if they can read the directions themselves or feel the object. This exercise enables the tutors to become aware of their own and others’ learning styles. The workshop discussion can then focus on dif-

ferent methods which can be used to recognize and to accommodate for different learning styles. Tutors need to be aware that their own style of learning may not be the style of their tutee.

CHERYL: This particular segment helped me to become aware not only of different learning styles in general but also of different ways that students approach writing in particular. All of the students I tutored this year were in the “pre-freshman” basic English classes. These students write a diagnostic paragraph on the first day of class, and even though this paragraph is in their writing lab folders, I had each of my tutees write a diagnostic paragraph for me. When asked, “What do you want me to write about?” my reply was always, “Anything you would like.” Some of the tutees would decide on their topic almost immediately; others would tell me that they didn’t know what to write about, at which point I would give them some suggestions. I read paragraphs about hobbies, vacations, pets, and first-day-of-college anxieties. However, there was one tutee who just sat in the chair, thinking. I offered suggestions, but he didn’t like them. He told me that he felt like writing but just couldn’t think of anything he wanted to write about. I decided to try an experiment and suggested that we take a short walk around the campus and talk. As we walked out the door, I told Joel to pay close attention to what he felt and heard while we were outside. After we walked and talked for about five minutes, Joel sat down and wrote an exquisite paragraph describing the sights, sounds, and feelings of nature.

I also discovered that my tutees differed in the type of review exercises they did best. For example, some students could work with a pre-printed exercise on internal punctuation and correctly punctuate most of the sentences, but could not write sentences requiring internal punctuation. Other tutees could, for example, write complex sentences, identifying subordinate clauses and using internal punctuation when necessary, but couldn’t do the same on a pre-printed exercise. By identifying the different working methods, I could allow each tutee to work with the method that caused the least anxiety while gently “pushing” him or her toward the other method as well.

PHYLLIS: Another aspect of learning which we discuss in the workshop involves the environment. In order to establish a peer-peer relationship rather than a teacher-student one, the tutor and tutee should sit side-by-side during the tutoring session. A characteristic of tutees is that they want personal attention. Even if the information they are trying to master could be learned by working in a workbook or using programmed materials with filmstrips or cassettes, these students want and need verbal feedback and human contact. Tutors who establish a friendly, comfortable peer relationship are more effective than those who tend to

be authoritarians.

CHERYL: I had a few potential obstacles to establishing peer-peer relationships with my tutees. First, I am an older non-traditional student who decided to go to college ten years after graduating from high school. I realized that there was a possibility that some of my tutees (all incoming traditional freshmen) might unconsciously see me as an authority figure. Second, not only am I an English major, I am a secondary education major as well. These students had just graduated from high school where they had spent about 25 hours a week with teachers; in college, they were spending 12 hours a week with teachers; and who was their peer tutor but a prospective teacher! Finally, for the past two years I have had a student assistantship as secretary to the Coordinator of Developmental Education, whose office is in the Student Affairs Office suite. This particular assistantship in this particular office location necessitated a thorough knowledge of the workings of the College. Some students acutally thought that I was a staff member rather than a student.

However, by playing up the role of student and playing down everything else, by being human, and by being sure that there were only two chairs at my table in the tutoring room and that they were side-by-side, I was able to establish that comfortable, friendly relationship with my tutees.

PHYLLIS: A fourth point that we stress in the workshop is the need for getting the most out of the tutoring session. Repetition and reinforcement are needed in order that tutees can master a skill. Some of the techniques that tutors can use are actually adaptations of counseling techniques. Following are examples of three of these techniques:

1. Getting Started

Sometimes when a tutee arrives for a session, he or she may have difficulty settling down or may want to discuss anything other than the subject. While the tutor can and should listen to the student, it is the tutor's responsibility to begin the session as soon as possible.

Examples: "I'm glad you have a date for Saturday night, Jack, but we really can't spend more time talking about that now. Do you have your paragraph with you!?"

"I understand your concern about your psychology midterm; I have a math midterm myself this afternoon, but now we'd better spend this hour working on English, Maria."

2. Clarification/Repetition

After explaining a concept to a tutee, the tutor can verify whether or not the tutee has really learned it by asking a clarification question. All too often tutees are willing to agree that they understand something when in actuality they have not assimilated the material. Their quick nod of the

head, “I see,” or “Now I understand” may only reflect superficial understanding.

Examples: “Can you explain why you used a comma in this sentence, Tom?”

“What did I tell you about topic sentences in our last session, Sally?”

“Point out the transitional words in this essay, David.”

3. Elaboration

If in the process of clarification the tutee seems unsure of his or her answer or only repeats verbatim what the tutor has said previously, the tutor can ask the tutee to elaborate on the answer.

Examples: “I’d like to hear more about why you organized your essay this way, Pam.”

“Bob, would you write three different sentences which demonstrate this rule?”

“Joan, can you think of some other verbs you could substitute for ‘walk’ to make this sentence more descriptive?”

CHERYL: I would like to explain my favorite technique for clarification and elaboration. When helping a tutee learn to distinguish between action and linking verbs, I used an exercise in which “sense” verbs—look, taste, feel, etc.—are used as both action and linking verbs. As the tutee decided if the verb was action or linking, I asked him or her the reason for the choice. I took the same approach when working on internal punctuation or on identifying main and subordinate clauses. For example, I would say, “Debbie, would you explain why you...?” Hesitation. “Debbie, your answer is correct, and I think you understand why you made that choice. I just want you to hear yourself explain it. Sometimes when we really listen to ourselves talk, we can understand things better. Now, why did you...?” At the beginning, the tutees were hesitant to answer; however, since I always asked the question for the first time when a correct choice had been made, the tutee soon overcame his or her fear. As time passed, I could “see” the tutee thinking while working on an exercise. The tutees’ self-confidence as well as understanding increased, and they were challenging themselves.

PHYLLIS: We also remind tutors that they are human. There may be times that a student asks a question which the tutor cannot answer. The immediate reaction of the tutor is to try to respond to the question. If he or she does that, the result could be that the tutee would be misinformed or confused. A better response is an honest, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out the answer for you.”

CHERYL: This is a difficult concept for tutors to remember at times. Even though we are human and capable of making mistakes, we do have

a tendency to avoid the appearance of not having a thorough knowledge of our field of concentration. I also think that for many tutors, the application of their knowledge is so automatic that they sometimes can't explain why they do what they do—they just do it and do it right. In my case, I made straight "A's" in English and have been told that my writing has a maturity resembling that of a graduate student. However, I still have to review the definitions of a gerund and an appositive, and I still have a difficult time remembering that the word to which a pronoun refers is called an antecedent.

On one occasion I had a tutee working with an exercise on restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses. The tutee was making good progress when she suddenly stopped and told me that she could not decide whether the clause in one of the sentences was restrictive or non-restrictive. I looked at the sentence and realized that because of the wording the clause could be either. However, to avoid misleading the student and to make sure I hadn't misread the sentence, I suggest checking with one of the English professors. Not only did the professor reassure us that the clause could, indeed, be either restrictive or non-restrictive, he also used that sentence to emphasize the importance of writing clearly so that the meaning of a sentence can't be misinterpreted.

PHYLLIS: Finally, tutors also need to become aware of ways to help students become independent learners. One way involves silence. Tutors need to be aware of the importance of silences, letting the tutee have time to think about what has been said and allowing him or her time to absorb what has been said and/or ask questions.

CHERYL: From the tutor's standpoint, I can't stress enough the importance of understanding the why's and how's of silences. I think that even though as tutors know we aren't God, we sometimes forget. We became tutors because we want to help other students, but we need to remember that helping not only takes the form of talking and listening and encouraging and praising, it takes the form of silence as well. This was one of the hardest things for me to learn. The silences can be absolutely excruciating at times. As I watched a tutee struggle with an identification of a fragment or agonize about whether or not to put a comma in a certain spot, my first inclination was to help—by talking. To keep in mind the importance of silences, I found myself silently thinking, "Look, young lady, you can't hold this student's hand all the way through freshman English," and I still find myself thinking that every now and then.

Throughout this year, I have found that the workshop was much more beneficial than I ever dreamed it could be. Even though I had had introductory psychology and education courses and had learned theories of

personality and development and principles of learning, the workshop reinforced these concepts and provided examples of their practical application in tutoring. I feel that, for the most part, I have been a very effective tutor, but I don't think this would have been the case if there had been no workshop in September.

Phyllis Sherwood is co-author of *Teaching Writing the Lab Way*, and now a Dean at Raymond Walters College, Cincinnati, Ohio. Cheryl Clark is an English tutor in the Writing Lab.