Training Peer Tutors Using Video

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There are many lessons that those of us who conduct peer tutor training programs can learn from human resources management. In recent years, managers have become concerned with the needs of their employees as it has become evident that satisfied workers usually are productive and increase the profits of a business. Frederick Herzberg, originator of the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, which he discusses in *Work and the Nature of Man* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1966), suggests that interesting work, achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement, and growth stimulate people to do high quality work. Creative managers in business and industry recognize the value of Herzberg's theory and use it as the basis of job training programs to motivate their employees.

Although those of us who direct writing centers may find this approach crass and materialistic, we can learn a great deal from the personnel management models in the commercial world. We can train students to become good tutors by providing them with learning experiences that contribute to their growth and development and by giving them the opportunities for achievement, recognition, responsibility, and advancement that Herzberg suggests. New tutors need to learn about their duties and responsibilities, the available resources, establishing relationships with their students, and working within the organization. But merely training tutors when they first begin to work doesn't ensure that they will remember and practice what they learned. Therefore, an ongoing training program that allows everyone to grow and to maintain a high level of tutoring is necessary.

The SMU Peer Tutoring Training Program

At the Southeastern Massachusetts University Writing/Reading Center, such a program has been established by conducting a variety of training workshops for tutors. Each tutor is required to attend for an entire semester one of the following workshops: "Tutoring Essay Writing," "Tutoring Reading and Study Skills," "Grammar for Tutoring," "English as a Second Language," "Journal Writing," "Using the Library as a Resource," "Helping Skills for Tutoring," and "Video Production."

Because the Video Production Workshop makes use of the key motivators suggested by Herzberg, this part of the training program has been particularly successful, useful, and interesting. In this workshop, experienced tutors plan, write, and act in a video script to be used for training new tutors. The objectives of this workshop are to give the participants the opportunity to share their expertise with others; to learn new skills, such as working in video, script writing, acting, and producing; to discuss and evaluate their tutoring methods; to let new tutors learn from experienced tutors; to make new tutors feel that they are part of an important and organized program; to give them insight into the demands of tutoring; to acquaint them with both bad and good tutoring practices; to provide flexibility in the training program; and to offer training in a visual and entertaining manner.

Requirements for Producing a Video Training Program

Production of a video training program requires no professional skills or special talents except for the actual filming. A TV studio must, of course, be available, with a
staff that is patient and willing to work with non-professionals. Most secondary and post-secondary schools have such facilities. The tutors who work on this project need not be communications majors, nor need they have had any prior acting experience. The director/producer needs no special expertise in film-making, script writing, or media. The groups that worked on the Southeastern Massachusetts University video tapes included English, biology, political science, and business majors, none of whom—including the director—had ever attempted a project of this type. In fact, one of the positive outcomes of this venture was that everyone learned together, helped each other, and developed bonds and relationships that continued beyond the duration of this project. The only requirements for tutors are enthusiasm and a willingness to work because they will have to spend a considerable amount of time on this project.

The director should have a sense of audience, organization, and time management. For example, the director must remind the group about the needs of the audience and how to use video most effectively, since an audience watching a TV screen will not be satisfied with information that could have been printed in a pamphlet. If that is all they get, they will be disappointed and stop paying attention to the material, no matter how significant it is. The director must also be able to divide the project into small tasks, to distribute the work fairly and equitably, and to guide and encourage the tutors. It is essential that the director keep the project moving along because, although an entire semester seems like a long time, it is easy to get bogged down. Therefore, the director's major role should be setting a schedule, making certain that it is adhered to in a reasonable manner, and ensuring that the project is completed.

Some Practical Advice

At this point some practical advice on how to proceed with such a project is in order. First, it is necessary to find out about the capabilities of the filming facilities that will be used and how the studio schedules filming sessions. Participants' schedules must be obtained and a time for the taping should be selected at the beginning of the project. If the participants do not have several free hours during which they can get together, the filming may have to be done in segments, and the script will have to be written to accommodate this scheduling.

Next, the size of the group has to be determined. Generally, four or five people seem best. Having fewer than four puts too much of a burden on the members and limits the sharing. Having more than five causes logistical problems and creates a management problem.

Although the group should do its own planning and decide on the content of the program, it saves time at the beginning stages of the project if an overall purpose for the use of the video tape has already been established. Some direction can save hours of discussion and allow the members of the group to get right to the heart of the matter: what should new tutors know?

The tutors who developed the first module of the SMU video training program felt that it was essential for tutors to be good listeners and to be sensitive to their students' needs. They decided that this message could best be presented by role playing, and they wrote short skits to illustrate two situations. The first part of this module shows what happens when a tutor dominates the tutoring session and doesn't give the student a chance to participate. This is followed by a scene in which the tutor does less talking and allows the student to express her opinions. The second part of this module portrays a tutor who ignores his student's negative attitude
toward tutoring and begins the session by correcting the usage in the student's essay. In the improved version of this scenario, the tutor shows concern about the student's feelings and discusses the ideas of the essay with him instead of correcting the grammar.

The second module of the video program deals with two additional problems that tutors may have in relating to students: how to work with the manipulative student who wants the tutor to do all the work and how to deal with the student who is unhappy with her professor. The two remaining modules in the series focus on techniques for tutoring writing. These include how to work with a student on prewriting, particularly brainstorming; how to work with a student who brings in a draft of an essay that needs extensive work; how to help a student develop a thesis and organize an essay; and how to work with a student on sentence structure.

Role playing or short skits can illustrate approaches to tutoring, and an overplayed wrong way to tutor provides action, humor, and an attention-getting device that makes new tutors aware of some of the things that can go wrong in a tutoring session. This format works particularly well with five people because two different role playing situations can be developed. Two participants can be students who are tutored by two other members of the group. The fifth person can be the narrator.

Participants write their own parts so that they can develop their own roles. Thus writing sessions are a major activity for this project. Because the writing usually takes longer than anticipated, it is important that people who work together have schedules that allow them ample opportunity to complete their part of the script. As the participants write the script, they should avoid long speeches that become boring to the audience, slow down the action of the piece, and are more difficult to perform than are short dialogue segments.

The script should be written completely to ensure that it is well planned and professional, that the participants have something to fall back on if they forget their lines during the performance, and that the TV studio personnel will know the best way to film the tape. Writing the script also allows the other members of the group to make suggestions for improvements and thus results in a better tape. The writing experience also promotes interaction among group members, an important aspect of this project. After a critiquing session, participants should be allowed time to incorporate suggestions into their scripts.

Time should be allowed for two or three rehearsals so that the group can make minor changes and get a feel for the whole script. More rehearsals are neither feasible nor productive, for this part of the production process takes place near the end of the semester when tutors are completing their own course assignments and studying for exams. Besides, too many rehearsals make the simulated tutoring sessions appear studied and make the activity a drudgery. The participants, especially the narrator, should try to memorize as much of the script as possible so that they will not have to keep looking at the script during the performance.

Some art work and music are also necessary for the tape. The program title, the credits, and other essential information can be put on small placards. The TV studio can help with details, and artistic students or the art department can do graphics. Introductory and concluding music make the production more professional. The group can select its own piece, but the TV studio can probably recommend background music.

And finally, the production should be kept as simple as possible. There is enough potential for difficulties to develop without building them into the script.
Problems That May Arise

Anyone undertaking a project to produce a videotape program with peer tutors should be aware of problems that may arise in the process. First, it takes longer than one might think to put together a fifteen- to twenty-minute program using peer tutors. If the tape is to be completed within a semester, it should be started by the first or second week, and as much of the work as possible should be completed early in the semester before the tutors are loaded down with their own class work. It is important for the director to keep the project on schedule, as it becomes easy to get bogged down in discussion, stuck in parts of the scriptwriting, and too concerned about creating a masterpiece. The director’s role is to keep the group on target and to make sure the objective of producing a program is accomplished.

Another problem that can develop is personality conflicts among the participants. It is important that the tutors who work together be compatible and that the director be on hand to listen to complaints, smooth ruffled feathers, and make sure that each group member pulls his or her weight.

Scheduling may also be difficult when one is working with students. Problems can include finding a time for weekly meetings to work on the project, matching tutors who will have time to work together, and scheduling a time for taping.

As the work progresses, tutors sometimes become dissatisfied and discouraged. They feel that what they are doing is not good enough, and once again the director has to be available to suggest ways to improve the script and to encourage the tutors.

Finally, the tutors need to realize that when they are being taped, every gesture and sound they make is picked up. They should try to avoid those little things that are usually not noticed, such as scratching one’s nose, adjusting one’s hair, or tapping one’s foot.

Benefits of Producing the Program

If it takes so much time and energy to produce a program that runs no longer than twenty minutes, is it really worth the effort? The answer is definitely “yes” since there are numerous benefits to both staff and students. When tutors work on these tapes, they become more aware of how they tutor and how they come across to their students, decide what are the most important ingredients of good tutoring, define their roles as tutors, clarify what they know, and find ways of sharing this knowledge with other students. As Herzberg’s theory suggests, they become better tutors because they are provided with interesting work, are given responsibility and recognition, can achieve and grow on the job, have the opportunity for advancement, and feel better about tutoring.

Participating in the Video Production Workshop is interesting work for the tutors because it is a unique experience for them. It provides opportunities for experimenting with new skills, for working in a new medium, and for being part of what they perceive as the glamorous world of TV. Since the tutors realize that there is no other setting in which they can do this kind of work, they are particularly enthusiastic about the project, and their excitement spills over to their tutoring.

Despite the fact that these tutors have to work harder and longer on the video tape than the other tutors do on their training workshops, they all like the responsibility and the recognition that come with this project. They feel special to be part of a group that has to develop and complete a product that becomes an essential component of the tutor training program. They know that they must be dependable, adhere to a schedule, take the work seriously, get the job done, and not let the rest of the group down. Tutors who are invited to join the Video Production Workshop are
flattered to be selected as role models for other tutors. Being given this special responsibility and recognition makes the workshop participants more responsible about their tutoring roles even though for many of them it is the last semester at the Center.

Although many jokes are made about the performance itself and tutors are dissatisfied with how they look on TV, they enjoy the fact that they have been able to make a permanent contribution to the Center. Their achievement is instantly noted by their peers, who are always anxious to see the latest video program, by the new tutors who watch as part of their training, by faculty and staff at the university, and by professionals in the field who see the programs in workshops at conferences. Providing staff with the opportunity to achieve in a tangible and recognizable way is especially important for tutors because much of the time their students give them neither feedback nor praise, and tutors are often left to wonder about what they have accomplished.

The video project also allows the experienced tutors to continue to grow and develop. They improve their own writing, communications, and interpersonal skills. They learn how to work as a team, write a script, act, and work in media. In addition, it gives them the opportunity to be creative. Instead of feeling complacent and apathetic about their work, they look forward to learning new skills, using their writing ability for a new purpose, and integrating many of the things they have previously learned.

For new tutors, the video program demonstrates what happens on the job, suggests some opportunities for growth and development, and provides a positive view of tutoring. It shows that a tutoring session must be informal but have structure, that the tutor must control the session but not dominate it, that tutoring is not easy, and that even experienced tutors have problems. The video tapes supplement the tutoring sessions that new tutors are required to observe. Seeing experienced tutors in these demonstration roles suggests to new tutors some of the opportunities available for their own growth and development as tutors. Using experienced tutors as trainers is also an extension of the peer-helping concept that operates between tutors and students. The tutors on the tapes are no experts, but they are sharing their experiences with those who have less experience.

These tapes are also useful because they are a convenient and enjoyable way of getting the same information to all new tutors without requiring them to attend a meeting at a designated time. In addition, they can be used as a basis for discussions of tutoring practices in workshops or to encourage tutors to talk about some of their apprehensions about tutoring or problems they have already encountered. Since everyone has watched the tapes, they can be referred to in any discussions about tutoring.

Ultimately, the value of the video program is its benefit to the students who are being tutored. Although how it helps them cannot be measured quantitatively, there are indications that the quality of tutoring has improved. Tutors have become more aware of their students' problems and how to deal with them. Tutors pay more attention to diagnosis, have more control of the sessions, encourage their students to do more of the work, ask more questions instead of rushing in and "fixing" the student's work, and take their tutoring more seriously.

A video production workshop is an efficient, creative, and challenging way to train peer tutors. It provides tutors with the opportunities for achievement, advancement, recognition, responsibility, and growth that Herzberg suggests motivates people to do high-quality work.
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