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AUTHOR Klaus, David J.
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ABSTRACT

Four patterns or generalizations about peer tutoring are discussed, including the following: (a) academic gains for the learner seem to be most uniformly produced by highly structured programs which explicitly define the content, sequence, and procedure for each lesson; (b) academic gains for the tutor seem most likely when the tutoring experience obliges the tutor to work with and manipulate the instructional content; (c) social growth seems most probable when emphasis on lesson content is removed and particpants are shown how to focus on each other's strengths instead of their weaknesses; and (d) different schools must aim their programs in different directions because of their different needs. Several trends emerged in the research suggesting three developments to be expected in peer tutoring over the next several years: (a) teachers and administrators instead of researchers will take the lead in designing programs; (b) the vast majority of programs will continue to be need-oreinted and therefore different from one school, and even one classroom, to the next; and (c) determining how students successfully help each other may have an enormous impact on all educational practices. (Author/MJM)

PATTERNS OF PEER TUTORING

Paper presented at the 1975 Annual Meeting of the
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Cross-Age and Peer Tutoring: Current Practice and Research

David J. Klaus
American Institutes for Research
Washington, D. C. 20016

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Recently, and with the help of a grant from the National Institutes of Education, we looked at a number of peer tutoring projects with the aim of discovering what made the good ones tick. Schools and teachers all over the country are enormously interested in peer tutoring, so it was thought that the digested wisdom of program descriptions and experimental reports would accelerate the diffusion and adoption of effective peer tutoring practices. Our overall findings were not strikingly dramatic. In very plain words, we learned that successful programs depend on lots of common sense and plain hard work. As long as these two ingredients are present, almost any combination of design alternatives seems capable of producing beneficial outcomes.

On the other hand, not all programs yield equivalent results. Peer tutoring has been used to meet a number of divergent needs under many different circumstances. Techniques which prove successful for one purpose may be ineffective or even counterproductive for some other goal. For example, programs which boost achievement for the learners may inherently preclude gains for the tutors. Similarly, peer tutoring which emphasizes cognitive outcomes may limit opportunities for social growth. And, programs which try to excell at all things are likely to produce no distinctive benefits.

Several generalizations emerged from the survey. Although each has the usual exceptions, they at least give some idea as to the orientations which characterize much of the current work in peer tutoring. These generalizations are a little more comprehensible if you visualize a triangle with one point labeled cognitive growth for the learner, another point labeled cognitive growth for the tutor, and the third point labeled

interpersonal benefits. Programs usually are aimed at one of these outcomes, or perhaps two, but generally not all three.

The first generalization is that academic gains for the learner seem to be most uniformly produced by highly structured programs which explicitly define the content, sequence and procedure for each lesson. In extreme instances, individualized programmed instruction is administered one frame at a time by a human teaching machine. Because these materials usually are developed through systematic tryouts and revisions, they work rather effectively even though the outcomes tend to suffer from narrowly defined instructional objectives. Many advocates of this approach seem unaware that schools depend on an intact curriculum in subjects such as reading. Boosting performance in selected reading skills is not productive without accompanying transitional materials which then allow students to enter a standard curriculum at an advanced point.

Second, academic gains for the tutor seem most likely when the tutoring experience obliges the tutors to work with and manipulate the instructional content. If the tutors are made responsible for determining learner deficiencies, planning remedial lessons, and devising appropriate materials, they necessarily become engaged in useful learning activities. Gains for the tutors are particularly likely because the learners' performance makes success explicit and immediate. Turning a lower-grade classroom into a laboratory for the benefit of older students is a dubious educational practice, however, because no amount of dilligence on the part of a tutor will insure that what is taught to the younger children is germane or even correct.

The third conclusion is that social growth seems most probable when emphasis on lesson content is removed and the participants are shown how to focus on each other's strengths instead of their weaknesses. Most children appear to have an enormous appetite for social service and are more than willing to learn how to be a better person through helping someone else. These genuinely supportive relationships cannot develop, however, when the older child adopts the role of a classical teacher and the younger plays the part of a traditional pupil. Instruction has to take a backseat to new kinds of useful classroom experiences.

Generalization four attempts to synthesize the first three. Different schools aim their programs in different directions because of their different needs. Peer tutoring could be advantageous where learner deficiencies can be overcome through individual instruction. Or, it could help where older students need practical encouragement to rekindle academic interest. Or, it could contribute where students need opportunities for interaction and recognition which do not depend on athletic prowess or dramatic talent. Unless one of these needs is present and recognized, and the peer tutoring program is designed to meet that need, there will be no motivation to assemble the efforts and resources required to initiate the program or continue one already underway. Whatever its aim, the program has to do something that is worth doing and that cannot be accomplished more easily in some other way.

This brings us around to the problem of the kinds of research schools need to facilitate the growth and value of peer tutoring in their classrooms. Because it happens to be quite relevant to this issue, let me begin by saying that the purpose of research is to enhance common sense,

not deviate from it. Educational practitioners are not interested in experiments that address problems, such as how to pair students, which they already have solved for themselves. What they do want to know is how to design programs which make it easier for youngsters to help each other and help themselves.

This kind of research is not going to be done by picking individual variables apart in a laboratory setting. One of the truths teachers have been trying to tell researchers for a long time is that learning experiences are not isolated episodes. Usually, peer tutoring is but one activity in a very complex school environment, and its impact must be assessed in terms of the overall contribution the program makes to student growth and development. These global aims seem to have gone unrecognized in most peer tutoring research. Instead, attention in the more rigorously conducted studies has been focused on specific changes thought to be particularly sensitive to the variables being manipulated.

The irony in all this is that by selecting only outcomes we believe are within our power to change, we effectively limit our scope of inquiry to program variables most likely to influence those outcomes. We have traded sensibility for sensitivity in the way the quality of our research is measured. For this reason, it was particularly gratifying to discover that noncomparative observations still outnumber experimental investigations in the field of peer tutoring. Practitioners evidently have the patience to look for long range results and the skill to describe outcomes in meaningful, communicative terms that many researchers seem to lack.

Peer tutoring is an area which deserves more attention. Many learners are difficult to reach with traditional methods and most likely would

profit from any alternate source of instruction. Many tutors are so excluded from conventional educational rewards that they need new opportunities to encounter success in school. Just the experience of participating can be enormously satisfying to many children, both learners and tutors, at the nether end of the popularity scale. At this point, we don't know all that peer tutoring can do. Let's hope, though, that when its benefits are quantified, the measures used will be ones that represent the full breadth of educational purpose.

Several trends emerged from the survey suggesting what kinds of developments may be expected in peer tutoring over the next several years. First, teachers and administrators instead of researchers have taken the lead in designing programs. One consequence is that rigid experimental controls have given way to adaptive designs aimed at smoothly functioning programs which can be implemented within the constraints of ordinary classrooms, the limitations of local budgets and the capabilities of school personnel. Researchers would be wise to encourage this trend and use their talents to observe and describe these programs rather than interfere with them.

Second, the vast majority of programs continue to be need oriented and therefore different from one school, and even classroom, to the next. This flexibility in the way programs are constituted may be one of the key reasons for the popularity of peer tutoring. There is no reason not to rely on the judgment of classroom teachers in designing activities, pairing students and developing materials. Research should aim at increasing the options available so that new programs can be created which more specifically reflect the needs of individual schools, teachers and pupils.

And, researchers also must develop far better measures of outcomes, particularly in the social area, than are now available.

Third, although the evidence so far accumulated suggests that the specific benefits which accrue from peer tutoring largely are determined by the nature and degree of structure imposed on the tutoring relationship, we really know very little about what goes on when children work together. Clearly, the help one student can give another is not the same as we would expect from a professional teacher. On the other hand, youngsters may be able to provide each other with learning opportunities that cannot be replicated in any ordinary classroom. Determining how students successfully help each other may have an enormous impact on all educational practices.