JOINING THE CONVERSATION: IDEA EXCHANGE
Scaffolding: Tutor Training Activity

Editor Note:

This submission builds on the following previously published TLAR article: Valkenburg, J. (2010). Scaffolding and tutoring mathematics. *The Learning Assistance Review. 15*(2), 33-41.

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Jim Valkenburg's article "Scaffolding and Tutoring Mathematics" that appeared in the Fall 2010 issue of *TLAR* addressed the characteristics of appropriate communication between a tutor and tutee as they approach their work together in study sessions. One strategy he examines is the use of scaffolding, a concept popularized by Jerome Bruner to describe a type of academic assistance utilized by a more competent tutor with his less knowledgeable or experienced tutee. Valkenburg states that learning assistance provided by a tutor "serves a good purpose" (2010, p. 33) when the work will "engage the student, bring a better understanding of the materials, and lead to the student's ability to independently do the work" (p.33). As a supervisor of college tutors and a study strategies coach, I was reminded of the chances tutors and I are afforded each time we meet with student clients who seek academic assistance on their paths to growth and success. Are we supporting or merely helping our clients recover? Empowering or enabling? Teaching independence or tossing a life jacket? No matter how we term our actions, we may be shortcutting the learning process for the sake of time and ease, and we know that "easy" does not always translate into long term understanding of the course material. The passive student in the "sit and get" lecture needs active involvement during study time.

Of particular interest to me is Valkenburg's reference to techniques studied by Wilhelm, Baker & Dube (2002) that a teacher (tutor) employs to move the student (client) through a series of increasingly independent processes. The techniques attempt to accomplish three goals of tutoring, which I stress to my tutors: teaching content (knowledge and skills), building good intellectual habits (study strategies), and encouraging motivational and affective processes (metacognition, self-efficacy, persistence, locus of control, self-regulation). How do we get tutors consciously to employ methods that structure their sessions so as to optimize the learning experience for the tutee?

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The tutoring cycle

Interviews and observations of experienced tutors yield plenty of information about characteristics of productive sessions. Some items to consider that tend to shape many sessions are following (Lepper, Drake, & O'Donnell-Johnson, 1997):

A. How does the session begin? Does the tutor assess where the client stands by presenting some material to work with, or does the tutor ask the client where he would like to start? Does the tutor choose the problems, or does the client offer problems he's having difficulty with?
B. As the session progresses, does the tutor begin to select problems or material that is challenging but not impossible for the client?
C. Posing questions that lead the client to solutions or understanding can help him or her learn to maneuver independently while allowing the tutor time to adjust to the needs of the client. "What do you think could happen if you . . . " "What do you need to know before you . . . ?" "What could be the next step?" This part of the tutoring session might involve not only some direct instruction to clear up misconceptions that could lead the learner down a lengthy, unproductive path but also an artful adroitness in guiding the client's progress.

Training tutors to scaffold instead of to save

Both academic support and academic rescue represent helping behaviors, and we know our tutors are helpful people. Implied in the partnership is that one participant is academically superior to the other. While there's the possibility that a hierarchy of power can suppress the client, the tutor's expertise can foster collaboration if used properly. As part of tutor training, the supervisor can use a practice activity that allows tutors to experience both sides of the desk. Tutors in different disciplines pair together to teach each other a skill--something they may have forgotten or never had the opportunity to learn during their academic careers. Tutors come to the training session prepared to teach a mini-lesson about something they are good at or know well. The choice could be a chemistry concept or a time segment in an historical era or a dance step.

Following are four distinct steps in the practice set:

1. You observe while I demonstrate.
2. I'll work and you help.
3. You work and I'll help.
4. You demonstrate and I'll observe.

After the pairs have had appropriate time to work through the steps, the tutor trainer leads the group in a discussion about the strategies "tutors" used in steps 2 and 3 as their "clients" were taking on more ownership of the task. The tutor trainer then records their responses for all to review.

In many tutoring sessions, tutors often skip from step 1 to step 4, omitting the opportunity to edge clients into the problem solving scheme. During steps 2 and 3, effective scaffolding requires an organized, hierarchical structure for the subject domain along with specific study strategies experts employ as they move to a higher level of proficiency (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Tutors who have had significant coursework in their majors can coach clients by using a variety of strategies, such as the inquiry cycle (question and monitor), incomplete statements, models and graphics, reciprocal teaching, redirecting questions, and what-if scenarios. They can express and demonstrate to their clients the methods they themselves put into practice in their major field of study to learn difficult material.

Effectively tutoring clients involves a skillfully conscious exchange. Tutors are expected to work with a variety of individuals and be sensitively and thoughtfully responsive to the actions and knowledge of each. Knowing when and how long to wait as the client processes information and how much help to provide are decisions that must be made in a short tutoring session. As tutors progress through the academic year and get to know their own capabilities as well as their clients', my objective is for them to develop into reflective practitioners who are eager to return the next year to tell their stories to the new training class.

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