

An LFP Article

Learning from Practice

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ABSTRACT

Boosting retention by ensuring the tutor/student match

by Cathy Roth

This article compares the results of two Pennsylvania Action Research Network (PAARN) project interventions designed to improve student retention by intensifying staff follow-up of either the tutor or the student immediately after the match. It reveals that volunteers, while new to the experience of tutoring, seem confident in their abilities to perform the tasks for which they have been trained. They aren't overly lenient when students fail to commit to the rigors of study. Students, on the other hand, seem to have forgotten what they had been told about their responsibilities by the time they are matched with a tutor. They sometimes don't understand the concept of collaborative learning, and they are reluctant to be their own advocates. If they feel ill at ease, they don't want to "make waves" with their tutors. These two PAARN projects found that intensifying contact with tutors early in the match did not improve student retention; tutors already had invested time in attending training and were ready to put their new skills to work. However, student retention did improve by intensifying our contact with learners.

Cathy Roth is the tutor-student coordinator for the Lebanon office of the Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, a position she has held since 1990. Her responsibilities are to train tutors, interview and test students, match students to tutors, and conduct follow-up tutoring activities.

ARTICLE BEGINS NEXT PAGE

Boosting retention by ensuring the tutor/student match

by Cathy Roth

The job of a tutor-student coordinator is a perplexing one. How can one ensure that the matches made between volunteer tutors and students have a chance for success? There are so many obstacles. When I first took on this position in 1990, I had no idea of the challenges I faced; now, as I reflect upon my experiences, I find it astounding that so many matches do work.

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to meet many students hoping for the chance to change the courses of their lives. I've thought that the obvious ingredients for a successful match were a good mesh between schedules, a convenient and comfortable meeting place, adequate instructional materials, and a well-trained tutor. Somehow, with these things in place, the tutor-student pairs would magically develop the optimal working relationships. Of course, I spoke to both tutors and students about potential problems and asked them to let me know if they encountered any difficulties. However, sometimes months would go by before their attendance reports alerted me to the realization that matches were failing. Not every match could be a success. Some volunteers weren't cut out to be tutors, and some students just didn't have the persistence to follow through with their education. When we routinely matched 15 to 20 tutor-student pairs after each tutor-training workshop, a failure here and there didn't seem as significant. The majority seemed happy with the program we offered. There wasn't a lot of literature and research to guide our strategy. Literacy programs were relatively new, and few standards had been set.

Adapting to change

All that has changed. Student numbers are increasing; volunteer numbers are decreasing. Program standards have been set, and many programs are having difficulty meeting those standards. We have an obligation to those who come to us for help. Many students wait for six months or more to receive the help of a tutor. It is my responsibility to steer them into the best matches possible. How can I ensure that the matches I make will last and lead to students' achieving their goals?

The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon allowed me to do some research pertaining to this question. As a group, we discussed the factors that contributed to the breakdown of matches. Surveys of those who dropped out of the program pointed to some obvious and uncontrollable factors, such as changes in jobs, lack of transportation, and problems related to physical and mental health. The surveys also revealed that both tutors and students felt their partners were not fulfilling their roles. Tutors complained that their students canceled too often, didn't do homework, and lacked enthusiasm. Many students felt they didn't have

the ability to succeed, and some blamed other problems in their lives. A few students complained that tutors were going too fast or too slow. They didn't always think the books were helpful. Some couldn't see the small steps toward progress; they wanted immediate results. It was curious to hear some people from both groups say that the others talked too much, because it was clear that communication was not occurring. They all had been told in their initial interviews what was required of them. Were they aware of problems in time to resolve them? Were they too "nice" to confront their partners with their shortcomings? Were tutors afraid to admit that they didn't always know what to do for their students? It seemed clear that help from program staff was needed. The fledgling matches needed more guidance and support. How could we provide it? It was decided that a PAARN project might supply the answers we were looking for. In the fall of 2000, we charted our course. Because I chose this topic for my project, our agency's Program Improvement Team agreed to limit the study to the matches being made in the Lebanon office where I work.

Support for tutors

Since tutors had had the most to say during the surveys and my time was at a premium, I decided that I would first look at the effect of providing more support for fledgling tutors. I remember how overwhelmed I was as a new tutor, even having had the experience of teaching in a second-grade classroom for 10 years. How could the typical volunteer, who had received only 15 hours of instruction, focus on the newly learned tutoring tasks and sense whether anything was amiss? As an insecure novice, I would have probably just shrugged off any sense of unease. I'm not sure if I would even have had the confidence to go to the coordinator with a question. I look back at my first class as a professional second-grade teacher and marvel at all the things I know now and didn't know then. I made lots of mistakes. I knew the subject matter and the techniques, but my courses in education hadn't prepared me for the myriad of problems in the lives of the children in my class.

With this in mind, I decided that I would intensify tutor support. I'd be present for each new tutor's first meeting with a student. In fact, this first meeting was incorporated into the last workshop session. I designed a tool to be used as a barometer to measure the tutor's confidence at each lesson. I called each tutor once a week during the first month of tutoring and asked questions that would help me determine if the tutor was comfortable with lesson elements and happy with the student's level of participation. If the tutor mentioned problems, I was able to give advice. In spite of this extra measure of support, statistics for the matches made during this study didn't show an improvement in student retention. Matches did break up. However, all the tutors who got special attention stayed in the program and were there the following year. That was a positive change.

If the problem of student retention couldn't be traced to the insecurity of new tutors, then I had to redesign my intervention for the next PAARN project. I turned my attention to student support. ABE students tend to have poor study skills; after all, they have a history of difficult experiences in the educational arena. In intake interviews, sometimes their motivation seems questionable. The complexity of family problems, poor health, depression, and low self-esteem makes me wonder if they will even be ready when a tutor is found. Is good rapport with a tutor possible? Will they live up to their responsibilities? ESL students have their own challenges. With ABE students, I can explain what tutoring will be like and tell them what will be required of them. Sometimes that's not possible with ESL students. How can I tell them about

their responsibilities? Cultural differences arise around the issues of punctuality and priorities. When they can't express themselves verbally, how can they communicate problems to their tutor? How can they tell that their tutors are upset because the students didn't call to cancel, or complete homework, or even practice English outside of their tutoring sessions? Because students can be on a waiting list for a long time before being matched, I cannot be sure that they will remember the responsibilities that were explained to them during their intake.

New strategy

In the fall of 2001, I introduced an intervention aimed at intensifying staff contact with students. As in the year before, I was present in Session Five of the workshop, when tutors and students met for the first time. When I called students to tell them of this meeting, I spoke of their responsibilities. I asked them if they were ready to commit to these responsibilities or if their lives were too hectic at the time to ensure a good beginning. I called each student once a week during their first month of tutoring and asked specific questions about their comfort with and commitment to the role of student. I was able to communicate with most of the beginning-level ESL students via family members who volunteered as translators, and I spoke enough Spanish to communicate with others. I was surprised to find that students had a lot to say about the experience. Some explained that their tutors were going too fast or the books were too easy or just not interesting. Some said that there was too much homework or that they didn't understand what they were being asked to do. It was clear that they had not confronted their tutors with these problems. Some were trying to be polite. One said he remembered my telling him it would take a few weeks to mesh well, so he was giving it time. That would have been fine if his problem was building rapport, but he was one who didn't understand why he had been given a seemingly easy phonics book. When I explained that he knew most of the words by sight and could skip some chapters until he got to the hard parts, he was relieved. I then called the tutor and dispensed advice about advancing through the book.

At the end of the trial period, I looked at tutor and student retention data and shared the results with the Program Improvement Team. They were impressed. The tutors had all stayed, and average student retention had improved by 5 percent. It seemed that students were aware of problems within their tutoring sessions, but they were reluctant to seek help when something was amiss.

I've come to believe that with well-trained tutors in place, the success of the program is directly linked to the communication between students and program staff. By keeping tabs on students in the initial phase of the match, staff can remind students of their responsibilities for their own success and step in to address any troublesome issues, thereby planting the seed for student success and program improvement.