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# **“I let him set the pace:” Volunteer Tutors’ Perspectives on Teaching in Adult Literacy Programs and Their Implications for Training**

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the roles that volunteer tutors in one-to-one adult literacy programs adopt with regard to instructional goals and lesson management. It suggests the importance of rethinking tutor training, and raises questions about the importance of instructor role in this adult learning context

Volunteer-based, one-to-one instruction has long been a mainstay of adult literacy instruction; volunteers make up approximately 43% of the workforce in federally funded programs (*State administered adult education program 2000 adult education personnel*, 2000) and are the primary instructors in countless other community and faith-based programs that are funded by other means. Adult literacy volunteers usually participate in pre-service training, 12-20 hours duration, and are then matched with adult developing readers and writers. The training (format, content, instructional strategies) they undergo, what subsequently occurs instructionally, and the relationship between these and learner outcomes is virtually unresearched. Although there are many significant avenues of inquiry within this broad topic, the purpose of this paper is to report on one important aspect of the training-instruction-learner outcomes equation, the perspective on teaching that is assumed in tutor training and then played out by volunteer tutors and adult learners in the instructional context. It addresses the question, “What is the relationship among the program’s perspective on teaching (as embodied in tutor training), the tutors’ stated perspective on teaching, and what actually occurs during one-to-one instruction?” By looking across four diverse program contexts, significant implications for tutor training practice can be derived.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Research in this area raises issues in two realms. First, it calls into question the extent to which a relatively small number of hours of pre-service training can actually prepare volunteers to achieve program goals and help adult learners reach their literacy goals. Second it begs the question of what is an appropriate role for educators and learners to assume in a one-on-one tutoring relationship.

### *Tutor Training*

Sandlin and St. Clair (in press) provide a helpful synthesis of the little research that has been done on the quality of instruction when volunteers tutor adult literacy learners. While largely dated, this research suggests their motivation to help is beyond doubt. However, questions about tutors’ efficacy surface frequently, and typically revolve around the adequacy of training (Ceprano, 1995; Kazemek, 1988; Meyer, 1985). Although conducted under highly artificial circumstances with predetermined categories of “best practices,” Ceprano (1995) argued that volunteers often fall short in selecting appropriate materials, responding to reading errors, and developing comprehension strategies. She does not provide evidence to suggest that professional staff are any more effective than volunteers; Bell, et al. (2004), in fact, suggest that many paid teachers lack both training and expertise in evidence-based reading instruction. However, Ceprano’s research clearly suggests that the volunteer sector is failing to reach its

potentiality. She implicates tutor training in her analysis. Pomerance (1990) is one of the few researchers who has done an in-depth, naturalistic examination of tutor-student instruction in one program. In particular, she looked at the relationship between tutor beliefs and tutor practices. She did find a mismatch between tutor beliefs about literacy and adult learning and their actual practice. Tutor training appears to be both the possible culprit and the potential answer to the problematic practice of volunteer tutors.

### *Educator Role*

There is much theoretical and empirical work which focuses on the role of the adult educator. Even debates about nomenclature (e.g., facilitator, teacher, resource, mentor) indicate a range of perspectives on the educator's function in identifying learning goals and developing learning plans, as well as his/her claims to subject area knowledge and expertise, and judgment of learner outcomes (Brookfield, 1986). Pratt (2002) offers one useful typology of perspectives on teaching--transmission, developmental, apprenticeship, nurturing, and social reform--which can function as a lens through which we can analyze teacher beliefs, intentions and actions. He defines perspectives as "an interrelated set of beliefs and intentions that gives direction and justification to our actions" (p. 6). Pratt reminds us that perspectives are not the same as actions, but that they can help us reflect on these overt indications of more internalized guiding principles by providing an analytic framework for doing so. I suggest that not only do teachers have teaching perspectives, but that they are also reflected in adult literacy programs via tutor training, program materials and curriculum, and the nature of ongoing support to tutors and learners as they work together.

Discussions of teacher-learner interactions in adult literacy education in particular are often shaped by assumptions about the role and responsibility of the players vis a vis making various learning decisions. Those who advocate for learner-centered and participatory approaches (e.g., (Auerbach, 1992; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997; Gaber-Katz & Watson, 1991) sometimes make this argument based on adult learning theory, others on political grounds related to the goal of bringing about social justice. Less frequently, such arguments have been connected to the congruence between learner power and control in the instructional context and a whole language approach to instruction. Issues of role and power are at least as relevant in a one-to-one tutoring context as in a classroom where most research related to these issues has been done. If anything, they are amplified by the intensity of a one-to-one relationship. Pomerance (1990) suggests that what makes tutoring unique is the potential to tailor instruction to the learner's goals, skill levels, interests, strengths and challenges. Such tailoring becomes particularly relevant when a learner-centered/participatory approach is taken, and is very much in line with the assumptions of andragogy, as expressed by Knowles, et al. (1998).

### **Research design**

This paper reports on one aspect of a larger study which looked at the relationship between program context and the teaching and learning transaction (vis a vis definitions of literacy, paradigms of reading and writing instruction, and assumptions of adult learning) in one-to-one instructional settings among volunteer tutors and adult learners in adult literacy programs. For comparison purposes, four diverse programs were selected to participate: Lincoln County Library Literacy (LCLL), Essex County Literacy Volunteers (ECLV), Center for Lifelong Learning (CLL), and Polkville Literacy Council (PLC).

Data collection consisted of participant observation of tutor training, and one interview with key staff in each program. Three student-tutor pairs were selected at random from within each program's pool of potential participants who met criteria for selection (instructional focus on literacy rather than English as a second language, working in the program regularly for a minimum of three months). Each of the twelve pairs audio-taped three consecutive sessions of their tutoring (36, in all) as examples of their instructional transactions. All tapes were transcribed for the purposes of analysis. Twenty-two of the twenty-four students and tutors were subsequently interviewed by telephone about their educational backgrounds, training, reasons for participating, and for clarifications of the taped tutoring sessions.

### **Findings**

Two of the key principals derived from Knowles' theory of andragogy (1998) are that adults are self-directed and that readiness to learn is connected to adult roles and tasks. Similarly, many practitioners and theorists suggest the importance of adults articulating their own goals for learning (felt need), working with educators to build learning activities designed to attain these goals, taking an active role in their learning by making decisions and choices about what and how they learn, as well as assessing their progress toward their desired accomplishments. In other words, creating learning situations in which adult learners can take authority over their own learning, or what I call here "lesson management," is considered a hallmark of what is considered good practice in adult education. The data analysis for this study focused in particular on these two aspects of adult learning, building instruction around learner identified goals, and lesson management, and the ways in which tutors enacted their roles in these two realms.

#### *Working toward a goal*

In tutor training, the importance of working on student identified goals was underscored in all four programs. For example, during their trainings two of the programs, LCLL, ECLV, not only voiced the importance of building learning activities around student goals, they also devoted time to specific activities designed to help volunteers understand this more fully. Although CLL does not have a specific activity in their training related to teaching to student goals, the importance of doing so was reiterated frequently throughout the training and concrete examples were given on how to do this in relation to many specific skills that were discussed. As one staff member said, "We constantly talk about student goals and using real life materials. You probably heard this in the training. You've got to say it a lot because if you don't, they will definitely fall back on [more traditional subject matter]." While the PLC staff would agree with the other programs about the importance of learner goals, centering instruction around them is not on the front burner when they described the program. Much of the training is dominated by "how-to" instruction for using graded instructional materials. Following instructional texts in the way that the training suggests seems somewhat antithetical to the idea of goal-oriented instruction.

One of the staff members at CLL noted that no matter how much they talk to tutors about focusing instruction on learner goals, many fail to do so. In fact, only one of the three pairs from his program made explicit connections between the learner's goals and the instructional materials they used. At LCLL, two of the pairs worked on activities and materials that were directly related to student identified goals; at ECLV only one did but another pair indicated that they had begun to do so after the data for this study was collected. It should be noted that at these three

programs, the use of commercially produced instructional materials was not stressed or even encouraged. This fact may make it more likely that student-tutor pairs depend on authentic, real-life instructional materials that are likely geared to the specific interests of learners. At the PLC, where goal oriented instruction receives much less emphasis in tutor training, none of the pairs seemed to be basing their instruction on any specific learner goals.

Even in cases where the work was not goal-oriented, however, tutors frequently mentioned their intention of planning instruction in response to the interests of the learner. For example, when asked about the most important influences on her practice, one tutor from PLC said, “[My student’s] reaction. The feedback I get from her. Whether she’s enjoying it. Like I see that she likes to read the novels, so I’ll bring more novels into it.” Another from the same program said that in choosing books for him and his student to read together, “I tried to pick topics that I thought he’d be interested in.” In other words, while only some tutors and students explicitly link instruction with learner goals, the message that instruction should be responsive to the interests of learners seems to come across to most volunteers and most found ways to implement this message, even if often quite indirectly.

### *Lesson management*

The nature of the “moves” that students and tutors make to manage the direction, pace, and activities of the lesson are a good indicator of the ways in which pairs interpret and act on their understanding of their respective roles in managing learning. An analysis of tutor training at the four programs indicates that volunteers in every site are directed to treat their students as equals, partners, or collaborators and to avoid treating them as children or as somehow incompetent. However, none of the programs was explicit about what this might actually look like in the context of instruction. In fact, at PLC and LCLL, prescriptive instruction of one kind or another implied tutor decision making with little or no learner input. At PLC a heavy emphasis on the use of graded instructional text books seems in contradiction to inviting and encouraging learners to make decisions about their learning just as it makes goal-centered instruction unlikely. The heavy emphasis on structured lesson planning in the tutor training at LCLL seems to leave little room for students to step in and set their own course.

In contrast, at CLL tutors gain some hands-on experience working as partners. Tutors are warned of some of the difficulties of adopting this non-school like and unexpected dynamic between learner and instructor, and specific strategies for encouraging learners to take increasing control over their learning are discussed. Although little is said at LCLL about this matter during tutor training, a staff interview indicates that it is a value that is communicated during the course of the match, in particular to students. She said, “We tell [the students] you’re the boss. If you don’t like what’s happening or you have something more important you tell the tutor [you should tell her].” Clearly, both of these programs place a high value on students’ participating in directing their own learning.

An analysis of the actual moves that students and tutors made during sessions that relate to instructional decision making about what should be done, how it should be done, and for how long indicate two general types of tutor initiated lesson management moves (it is important to note that this analysis focuses only on moves made by students and tutors to direct the session, not on the interchanges focused on specific reading, writing or math instruction): authoritative moves and collaborative moves. Authoritative moves were direct and indirect procedural directives including making assignments and setting a task to be accomplished, planning statements regarding what will be done during the session or for homework, setting the pace of

the session including when to end it, and reprimands including failing to complete a task or misplacing or forgetting instructional materials. Collaborative moves involved checking in with learners about the process; explaining, clarifying, getting clarification from the learner, and soliciting input and preferences on learning activities and materials. The student moves fell into three broad categories. Like the tutors, they made authoritative and collaborative moves, but they also made authority seeking moves. Authority seeking moves were asking for clarification of an assignment, information, evaluation, or help.

An analysis of the frequency of types of lesson management moves indicates that despite variations in emphasis among the four programs with regard to the roles that tutors and students should play, the results were remarkably similar. Out of a total of 188 lesson management moves, 121 (64%) were tutor authoritative moves. Only two tutors (one from LCLL, one from ECLV) used authoritative moves less than half the time that lesson management moves were made. Only 34 moves (18%) were tutor collaborative moves. Similarly to tutor authoritative moves, there was little variation in the average number of tutor collaborative moves across all four programs. Although one tutor used collaborative moves 30% of the time, most hovered near the average. Student moves would not necessarily be expected to change depending on the program context as they generally do not participate in program training. However, their moves can be an indication of program staff orienting them to appropriate learner roles in adult instruction. However, only one move each by two students was coded a student collaborative move; students took authority 5-8% of the time, and sought authority 6-15% of the time. All in all, the students played only a minor role in managing their lessons at all four programs.

In separate interviews, students and tutors generally agreed about who took the lead in directing their sessions. Of the 10 that responded to questions about decision making in their sessions, half agreed that the tutor directed the sessions. The other half felt that the student either took the lead or actively partnered with the tutors to make decisions collaboratively. While the actual data do not bear out these opinions, they do indicate that some pairs have at least adopted the idea of adult learners participating in setting the course for the own learning. They may, however, lack the know-how to enact this type of instruction.

### **Discussion**

The data indicate volunteer tutors do not always adopt instructional roles that are congruent with principals of good adult education practice. Training does not appear to be a good vehicle for facilitating this process. It seems likely that a lack of fit between tutor training and actual learners, the impossibility of covering everything a literacy instructor should know to meet their students needs in a relatively short training, and forgetting over time are all implicated. These findings raise several questions for further analysis. On the one hand, programs may need to rethink tutor training. One significant issue to consider is the timing of training. A cognitive apprenticeship model (Brandt, Farmer, & Buckmaster, 1993) and innovations in workplace training (Hoyt, 1996), suggest the potential of delaying training until needed and embedding it within the actual tasks they carry out while tutoring. Meanwhile, the satisfaction with which students described the roles that they and their tutors took in instructional decision making, despite their relative passivity, raises questions about the relationship between learner role and learning outcomes. It is probably important to acknowledge that the importance many adult education theorists and researchers place on learner role may be based more on philosophical commitments than empirical evidence of effectiveness or learner satisfaction.

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