

The Mutual Benefits of Community Tutoring

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As one of the most immersive components of my study abroad semester in Ireland, I spent one evening each week with the Study Buddies Program of the Dublin separated Children's Service. Through this organization that provides tutoring to refugees and asylum-seekers, I worked with two African students in their early twenties on subjects including chemistry, biology, and home economics. We reviewed material taught in class, often with a focus on the struggles that arise during study in a nonnative language. Through this program, I experienced the dramatic benefits such programs can provide to both students and tutors. Upon reflection I began to understand this type of interaction as a robust remedy for many of the challenges often internally cited as most pressing in my home country of the United States, such as fragmentation and polarization of groups, xenophobia, and general lagging educational achievement. I believe that tutoring can foster qualities in participants that promote opposite, positive trends in social dynamics and education.

The effectiveness of tutoring programs like Study Buddies is in the intimacy of the connection between two minds in joint exploration of a concept. To be helpful the tutor must attempt to understand the thinking of the student in order to evaluate the degree of comprehension of an idea and hopefully increase it. This can be frustrating but also unifying as the two people commune intellectually. In my experience this connection was between two individuals from very different circumstances, both of us new to our current situation but coming from backgrounds on different continents. However, if the persons are of less contrasting cultural groups such as different neighborhoods or even of similar backgrounds, one still must step out of her or his own mind and learn to think like another. A home economics activity assigned to one of my students was to restate recipe and other instructions in different terms. When figurative phrases and idioms such as 'wear and tear' appeared it often took long strings of attempted definitions to effectively communicate a meaning. After a failed attempt I would try again to create an effective explanation, moving from the first definition that was most logical to me and with each attempt hopefully moving towards a definition lucid to the student. With every attempt I gradually moved out of my way of thinking and towards that of the student. This ability to move outside of one's own ideas and appreciate an alternative outlook has copious applications outside of tutoring.

As the American political climate is ceaselessly criticized for extreme and debilitating partisanship and as our population continues to struggle with racial and other social conflicts, tutoring is a method of cultivating the ability to see from another point of view (Layman et. al 2006). If enough people, especially current and future leaders, attain this aptitude then our nation can move towards tolerance and effectively addressing disagreements with respect and a desire to understand all peoples involved. For example, perhaps this capacity could purge the immigration debate and disdain for certain groups and instead acknowledge the rights of all people and focus the discussion on the most effective way to respect the dignity of all persons while seeking a sustainable and fair system. Connectedly, in tutoring relationships such as mine, where one person is a non-native speaker of the language being used, the other person shares in the struggles involved in learning a new tongue and becomes more sensitive to imperfect speech. Because of this awareness, she or he will then promote tolerance through daily interactions as the

United States becomes an increasingly multilingual nation. The students I worked with were capable but relatively new English speakers; therefore I witnessed the frustration that still exists even after a period of studying the new language. They would often understand material but perform poorly on tests and assignments because of struggles with the language. Through this interaction I gained some idea of the difficulty of adapting to the lingua franca of a new country.

Beyond facilitating transition in the area of language, these programs could also help in other often-cited modern issues. Educational achievement in primary and secondary education is unequal, with poorer communities producing lower standardized test scores (Shwebel 2012). Volunteer tutoring programs offer a supplement that can combat this trend at a community level more effectively than broad education policy changes. The large scale of national or statewide efforts to improve schools generally requires that efforts take the form of more testing and stricter curriculum standards. Community organizations can fill this need more efficiently and have the ability to absorb some level of inadequacy by the school system. As a tutor, I had the ability to customize our work directly to the needs of the student and observe the benefits of these modifications. Additionally, often-inadequate government funding inhibits efforts to lower student-teacher ratios, which some consider to be an important component of successful education systems (Biddle and Berliner 2002). Tutoring creates a one-person classroom at little cost through the volunteerism of community members who also gain from the program.

Tutoring is a symbiosis in which students receive the benefit of academic assistance while helping mentors to reinforce and expand their knowledge through the effort involved in providing adequate explanations. Beyond any emotional or sentimental benefits generally associated with service, which may be substantial, volunteers also make immediate and concrete gains through interaction with students. Tutors may increase their knowledge of another culture as I did or gain a more complete vision of their community by interacting with people whom they normally would not. Becoming a more able teacher is a profitable skill in any field or career, helping professionals to become more adept in training new employees or explaining concepts to colleagues. Tutoring involves the transmission of ideas as a specific and important form of communication and therefore improves the articulation skills of the teacher, which may translate to nearly any task or situation. For non-professionals such as secondary and university students, working in this capacity can add to education, an important but neglected aspect. In addition to receiving and analyzing information through standard assignments, student-tutors can practice verbally expressing and reinvesting their knowledge in others. Much of the science material we studied was at a level that I had learned in the previous years of my undergraduate education, and I had the opportunity to test and reinforce my knowledge through discussing it with someone else. Because of this reciprocity of opportunity, sustainable programs can be created without sole dependence on the altruism of tutors.

While working with refugees my role was also part of a wider effort to assist new residents to integrate into the community. This aspect may be present when undertaking projects with minority groups and with those in poverty or who have extensive academic difficulties. The sign of concern shown by involvement in a service such as this, coupled with the increase in achievement hopefully produced, could give confidence to the student and in this way lead to an analogous assimilation. In our developed society, language skills and education can be crucial to eliminating areas around the edges of society where those lacking these assets are pushed.

Further expanding the possible gains of these programs are the links between education, poverty, and health, which are certain, though not exhaustively understood (Wagstaff 2002). Extrapolation of the benefits of raising educational success through tutoring could in theory help

reduce poverty and improve health in certain populations. This potential to improve individuals and society must be considered in context to other needs. If for example, the specific program was aimed at victims of poverty, these persons might have a more immediate need for food or utility assistance than extra hours of assisted study. Yet within a cycle in which lack of education leads to poverty but poverty also inhibits success in education, even with limited resources perhaps tutoring has a place. Integrating this type of personal academic assistance in conjunction with immediate relief of privation is a path towards more long-term solutions to poverty for individuals, families, and communities.

Though the possibilities outlined here may be overly optimistic in their broader effects, through my personal experience I believe that the principles discussed are true at the level of individuals and have potential to work on wider scale. These ideas merit reflection so that the potency of community tutoring programs can be recognized in order to promote their expansion. An evaluation of the already numerous organizations functioning across the United States in regards to the validity behind these principles and an understanding of these programs within the framework presented could help to both improve these programs and to assess and refine the concepts offered. Solidification of these ideas could lead to greater emphasis on such programs in communities, high schools, and universities, spreading their benefits and demonstrating their effectiveness.

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References

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