ESTABLISHING A HELPING RELATIONSHIP: SELF-DISCOVERY

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A helper is someone who assists another in coping with a difficulty. Sometimes helping involves simply listening to someone who is discouraged. It may also involve helping someone plan an alternative action. Informal helpers may have no specific training; however, many have personal qualities that appeal to others and as such are simply better able to provide assistance.

In a traditional academic setting, students often seek help from more formal helpers such as their professors, counselors, academic advisors, coaches, or mentors. These helpers usually have special talents or perhaps have been involved in specialized training or skills to assist others. Undoubtedly, many are adept at providing excellent help. So why are some helpers (both informal and formal) more helpful than others? We believe it's the helper's ability to establish a positive helping relationship that provides the foundation for success.

A framework for establishing a helping relationship between tutor and tutee can be provided by borrowing from the counseling profession. Just as in a counseling relationship, the tutoring relationship must be steeped in mutual trust and understanding and built with positive regard and genuineness between each participant. The end goal for both the tutor and tutee is to develop what MacDonald (2002) terms a teaching and learning relationship. "A teaching and learning relationship means that you [tutor] and your tutees develop ways of communicating and ways of being together which fit the purpose of teaching and learning" (p. 6).

The first two upcoming exercises are designed to allow tutors in training to reflect on and practice the art of establishing a helping relationship. Others are designed for tutors to become self-aware of their own use of learning strategies, learning preferences and personality development. The tutor trainer, acting as facilitator, will need a blackboard or flipchart to record responses. A room with movable chairs is ideal. Some of the exercises will require the tutor trainer to develop scenarios for tutors in training to role-play.

Exercise 1

Instruct the tutors in training to think about someone who has helped them in the past – a friend, teacher, neighbor, or tutor. Begin by asking the tutors to make a list of the person's characteristics (at least five) that they found particularly helpful. Each tutor should compare his/her list with at least two other tutors. The facilitator of the group compiles a master list of the characteristics on the board or flipchart. Tutors can then reflect on items from the master list they find within themselves, and the qualities they would like to develop, and ways to develop these characteristics during their tutoring.

SELF-DISCOVERY

The ability to form a relationship between the helper and helpee is a basic premise in any professional helping context. Forming a relationship requires that the helper become sufficiently self-aware and sensitive to the process of learning and teaching. In relation to the tutoring experience, it is important for tutors to become aware of their biases toward learning and the ways in which their needs may be met by tutoring. Such self-discovery assists the tutor in delivering useful, unencumbered services and promotes a safe, trusting environment for the tutee.

One way that self-discovery may occur is through recalling significant learning experiences in one's past. Many of us can recall having a teacher or tutor who motivated us to learn in unexpected ways. If we are fortunate, that experience brought with it increased enthusiasm, heightened self-esteem, and fond memories. It would be important to remember what some of the qualities of the teacher or tutor were, and what interactions or behaviors, in particular, provided a context for learning to occur.

Exercise 2

Instruct the tutors in training to think about a particularly effective tutor or teacher. Direct them to make a list of what instructional strategies they found particularly helpful (story telling, outline notes, humor, active participation, or group projects.). The facilitator then compiles a master list on the board. Have the tutors reflect on those strategies that would work well for different types of subjects and on those that would work particularly well for tutoring.

Another means of reflecting on our learning histories is to recall a time in which we felt particularly vulnerable, ashamed, or fearful while receiving education or tutoring. What qualities in a teacher/tutor were intimidating? Did his/her behaviors, verbal or nonverbal, restrict our ability to learn? These experiences can be very powerful; with self-awareness and insight, we can decide which behaviors we choose to exercise – and which to avoid – while assuming the tutorial role.

In keeping with the idea of monitoring our behaviors, it would also be important to note our own reactions when faced with frustrations. Such information could give us useful insight into how we might react if we are tutoring a student who simply cannot understand our directions or the material we are attempting to present. What level of patience do we

have while under stress? How do we behave if we experience aggravation toward someone?

How do we behave if we become aggravated with ourselves? How willing are we to see

these dark sides in ourselves if our goal is to give help and our self-perception as a helper?

More importantly, what are the risks of ignoring or minimizing these potential reactions?

Becoming aware of our less helpful reactions allows us to think through difficult situations

and ultimately circumvent these non-productive feelings and behaviors.

Exercise 3

Instruct the tutors in training to think about a particularly bad learning experience.

Direct them to make a list of what they found particularly unhelpful or intimidating. The

facilitator then compiles a master list on the board. Tutors can then reflect on what was most

intimidating about the experience, how they handle aggravation or conflict, what

responsibility could they claim during this experience, and to consider ways in which they

could have made the learning experience better for themselves.

Tutors should become aware of the individual learning styles of the tutees to best

determine ways of supporting them during tutoring. Compatibility is important between

teaching and learning. All students have personality styles that influence the way they

respond to feedback, instruction, and difficult tasks. One person may respond to gentleness

with relief while another may respond with distrust. Another person may feel more

comfortable with a somewhat rigid personality believing that with that structure comes

productivity, while another person may fear being judged or criticized by the same person.

Although tutors cannot become chameleons and change their styles upon demand, they can,

at the very least, inform the students of their general style and allow them to see if the way

the tutors typically instruct is conducive to their needs in learning.

Helping tutors foster sensitivity towards others begins with helping them foster a true sensitivity to themselves. The tutor trainer can accomplish this through the use of extensive self-discovery instruments and activities. Current trends in tutor training are beginning to assist tutors to discover their own preferences for learning, and to consider how their personality influences both their learning and teaching. As they become more aware of these influences, they increase their effectiveness as tutors while becoming sensitive to the learning needs of their tutees.

One option to consider during training is to use the newly revised *Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI)*. Developed by Weinstein, Palmer, and Shulte (2002), this 80-item self-assessment inventory (based on skill, will and self-regulation components of strategic learning) is designed to help college students develop greater awareness of their learning strengths and weaknesses. Students' awareness about – and their use of learning and study strategies – are measured using standardized (percentile score equivalents) and national norms for ten scales: Anxiety, Attitude, Concentration, Information Processing, Motivation, Selecting Main Ideas, Self Testing, Study Aids, Test Strategies, and Time Management. According to the authors, the LASSI provides students with a diagnosis of their self-reported use of learning strategies. It is prescriptive in that it provides feedback about areas in which students may be weak and need to improve (Weinstein & Palmer, 2002). As tutors learn about their own use of learning strategies, they are better able to facilitate new options for learning with their tutees.

Exercise 4

Administer the LASSI to the tutors in training. Have them plot their results on the scoring graph included with the self-assessment instrument. Divide the participants into

small groups of three or four and have them share their results with one another. Then, based on their results, participants should plan individual prescriptions for growth in their weaker areas. Most importantly, the facilitator should help the participants list possible intervention strategies for academic growth for their prescriptions (e.g., use of time planners, setting goals, eliminating negative thoughts about abilities, trying new methods of note-taking, etc.).

The *Learning Style Inventory* (Kolb, 1999) is one of several learning styles inventories designed for use with college students. Based on Kolb's theory of experiential learning, the self-assessment inventory requires the completion of 12 sentences (selecting four possible choices for each) that describe learning. The inventory introduces students to the ways they learn and how they deal with ideas and day-to-day situations (e.g., solve problems, work in teams, manage conflict, make career choices, and negotiate personal and professional relationships). Kolb (1984) viewed learning as resulting from four kinds of experiences. He termed these experiences the experiential learning cycle: Concrete experience [experiencing], reflective observation [reflecting], abstract conceptualization [thinking], and active experimentation [doing]. The cycle emphasizes the interrelationship among the four processes. He posited that effective learning requires the flexible use of all four modes. However, he believed that few people are equally effective using each. The more heavily a person relies on a single part of the cycle, the less balanced he/she is at learning.

The self-assessment requires students to combines scores from the learning cycle (using a grid) which then provides them with one of the four learning style types (Diverging, Assimilating, Converging, or Accommodating). Each learning style combines different

learning components of the cycle. For example, diverging combines the learning steps of concrete experience and reflective observation.

The LSI booklet describes each style more completely. Below is a brief description summarized from Kolb (1999) and Herlin, Albrecht-Munk and Bell (1995).

Divergers like to view concrete situations from many different points of view. Their approach is to observe rather than take action. Brainstorming, imaginative ability, sensitivity to feelings, collaboration, and listening objectively are common characteristics of this style.

Assimilators are competent at putting information into concise, logical form. They prefer to deal with abstract concepts and ideas. They prefer to learn from lectures, readings, exploring and creating theoretical models, and they like to have time to think things through.

Convergers are best at finding practical application for ideas and theories. They have the ability to define problems, draw conclusions, and solve problems. They are good decision makers. They prefer to experiment with new ideas, and enjoy simulations, laboratory assignments, and practical applications.

Accommodators like to learn from hands-on experience. They enjoy carrying out plans and completing tasks. People with these preferences enjoy adapting to changing environments and encountering new experiences. They sometimes rely too heavily on gut feelings rather than on logical analysis. Working with others, setting goals, and doing fieldwork are common characteristics of this style.

Exercise 5

Administer the *Learning Style Inventory* to the tutors in training. Instruct them to plot their results on the learning cycle diagram included with the self-assessment instrument. They will connect the dots to form a kite-shaped pattern on the diagram as directed by the

booklet. Fully discuss the four modalities of the learning cycle and how reliance on one or two areas may indicate an underdevelopment of other ways of learning. Their scores indicate how much they rely on each of the four different learning modes.

Discuss the four learning styles. Divide the participants into groups based on the results of their learning styles (e.g., the accommodators in one group, divergers in another, etc.). The tutors can then reflect on and process the results with each other. Each participant should then plan individual prescriptions for growth, ways to develop learning skills not common to their particular style (Consult Herlin, et al., p. 75 for additional material for this activity).

Another choice for self-assessment is *The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI), Form M, developed by Katherine Briggs & Isabel Myers (1998). The inventory, based on Carl Jung's theory of personality type, illustrates how personality type directly influences values, decisions, communication, and learning preferences. The self-scorable MBTI measures preferences on four scales: extroversion/introversion (where you focus your attention and energy), sensing/intuition (how you acquire or gather information), thinking/feeling (how you make decisions), and judgment/perception (how you relate to the other world). The assessment has four parts requiring 93 responses. Individuals are assigned to one of 16 personality types. "Each type, or combination of preferences, tends to be characterized by its own interests, values and unique gifts" (p. 2).

Ditiberio and Hammer's *Introduction to Type in College* (1993) is an effective resource for helping tutors understand and interpret their MBTI results. The booklet describes, among other topics, the theory behind the instrument, definitions of each of the eight preferences, information on how to use the result in selecting college classes, majors

and careers, learning styles, writing, studying and taking tests. Another valuable resource is

a short 15-minute video titled *Exploring Type with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Hirsh,

1995).

Exercise 6

Administer the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Form M) to the tutors in training.

Show the video, *Exploring Type with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Divide the

participants into small groups based on their psychological type. (Since there are 16 types,

some students must be matched with similar but not exact types.) Have group members

process their results with one another. Additional discussions could include any number of

topics from the Ditiberio and Hammer (1993) manual. Consider learning styles (p. 6) and the

tasks of college students (pp. 8-10). Participants should plan individual prescriptions for

growth based on their results of the MBTI (fostering their opposite preferences).

Another suggested topic for discussion during the exercise is to have students list

advantages and disadvantages of tutoring students with similar and different types. Then,

allow students to brainstorm strategies to tutor students with different personality types.

There are a myriad of other self-discovery topics that could easily be developed for

tutor training. For example, consider multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993). Using

this paradigm, tutors would benefit from understanding not only the range of their unique

intellectual abilities but also the potential of their tutees. Nelson and Low's *Exploring &*

Developing Emotional Intelligence Skills (1999) is another self-assessment instrument. It

assists students in determining their interpersonal communication under stress, personal

leadership, and self-management in life and career. Recently published, *Emotional*

Intelligence: Achieving Academic and Career Excellence (Nelson and Low, 2003), a self-

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directed learning program, provides the tutor trainer with an array of activities adaptable for training.

The process of self-discovery is a vital component in any tutor-training program. Through this process, tutors learn about themselves in ways that facilitate teaching and learning. As such, they can grow in confidence as tutors and extend that sense of confidence to their tutees. With a greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, empathy emerges towards others. Empathy allows for an increased capacity to communicate in both verbal and non-verbal ways. The next chapter introduces tutor trainers to appropriate activities that foster more effective communication.

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