

SAY AGAIN! TRAINING TUTORS IN COOPERATIVE TUTORING

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How many times have you observed a tutor very busily and expeditiously “telling” a student how to do something while the tutee is straining to comprehend or is checked out to the nearest space station?

Anyone who has ever taught knows it is difficult to give up our role as star in the classroom. Not so strangely, tutors experience the same difficulty. There is a strong tendency to perpetuate the one-way delivery of information experienced in the lecture format that still dominates classroom instruction — to teach as one was taught, however painful that process was, and to convey the most information in the shortest span of time.

A training activity that dramatically demonstrates both the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of such one-way communication of instruction is an activity called the Master Builder. The training involves the tutors in a hands-on activity, provides a lot of laughs, and occasionally results in some rather spirited dialogue during the processing stage. It’s much easier to demonstrate, but, hopefully, the training plan that follows will enable the reader to replicate the training session.

Training Plan

Topic: Communication: Training Tutors in Cooperative Tutoring

Objective: To demonstrate the need for two-way dialogue in giving instruction.

Participants: Tutors at any level of the certification process.

Facilities: Movable tables and chairs

Instructional Materials: Two file folders for each participant, an envelope for each trainee that contains the same set of geometric shapes, a 3 x 5 card, and a pen or pencil for each participant. Our set of geometric shapes contains five right triangles of different sizes; a parallelogram and a square. The shapes and sizes could be varied, but all the members of each must have the exact same sets.

Time: One hour

Activity:

1. Have participants form groups of three or four.
2. Designate a Master Builder in each group.
3. Provide each participant, including the Master Builder, with two file folders, an envelope with a set of the geometric shapes, a 3x5 card, and a pen or pencil.
4. Give the following instructions:
 - There is to be no talking among individuals until further notice.
 - Open and set your two file folders on end in front of you to form a 3-sided barrier behind which you will work. No one must see what you do as you work.
 - Remove the geometric shapes from your envelope and check that you have seven pieces consisting of five right triangles, a parallelogram, and a square. Compare and be sure each person in your group has the same set.
 - The Master Builders will create a design behind their folders. As they do so they will tell you what to do. Following the instructions of the Master, you will create the same design behind your folders. You must be sure no one sees what you are doing.

- No one may ask questions; no one may look at another person; no one may laugh, comment, or gesture.
 - The Master may not check to see what the others are doing and may not ask about their progress or interact in any way, only tell them what to do to replicate the design he or she is creating behind the folders.
 - Questions?
 - Begin.
5. When the designs are completed, usually within 5 - 10 minutes, ask the tutors to remove their folders and compare designs with that of the Master Builder. Rarely will there be an exact replica, and the variations can be so bizarre there'll be a great deal of laughter, protestation, perhaps even accusations between the Master and apprentices.
 6. Ask the participants to briefly sum up on note cards their feelings about the experience.
 7. Rotate the Master Builder role so that each person gets to experience giving the instructions. After each experience, ask the tutors to write a summary reaction statement on note cards.
 8. As a final activity, let the first Master Builder resume that role, but permit questions and answers as the design is created.
 9. Ask the tutors to jot down reactions to the cooperative experience, and compare it with the others when they couldn't interact.
 10. Finally, process the experiment:
 - What did you find frustrating and why?

- What worked best and why?
- What are the implications for tutoring of this experience?

Participants will express frustration over lack of preciseness, terminology, which meaning was intended for certain phrases such as “on top.” Ultimately, the points made and reinforced by the activity are that tutors must be very precise in giving instructions, careful to involve the tutee in dialogue, sure to listen to both what is said and to the body language of the tutee, cognizant of the vocabulary and phraseology used, and certain the tutees truly understand by asking them to demonstrate their understanding in words or problem solutions.

This activity is an excellent way to make these points about cooperation in tutoring situations in a light-hearted but very forceful manner that is much more effective than “telling” the tutors their sessions should consist of cooperative dialogue.