

Tutorial Relationships Pedagogy and Practice

Robert Fried states (2001), “If you believe that adults can ‘make’ children learn well – in the absence of or in defiance of a child’s inner sense of confident engagement with the power of discovery and mastery – then, in my view, you are placing that child at great risk of failure as a learner (p. 243).” What role does a teacher take then to create great learners? How do we tap on that inner power to learn and discover? Kirsten Olson (2009) in her book *Wounded by School* offers an insight, saying “Human learning is in part a mystic and mysterious experience, requiring both the privacy and communion, challenge and pleasure, to reach its highest levels (p. 28).” For me, Tutorial Relationships (TR) creates those opposing but complimentary forces in the classroom and helps teachers reach those high levels of learning so that every child finds joy that process.

Santiago Ricón-Gallardo (2012, Ricón-Gallardo & Elmore, 2012), one of the leaders in the project in México explains the Tutorial Relationships practice this way:

The pedagogical contract between the teacher and the student is that the teacher will offer only those texts and topics that he/she has demonstrated mastery of and the student will choose (from) among those his/her preferred choice. Teachers present students with a list of topics that they have previously studied in a network of tutors. The students begin individual lines of inquiry and, with the support of the teacher/tutor, build on previous knowledge through thoughtful questioning. Once a student masters a topic, he/she prepares a public demonstration to present what she has learned and her learning process to her peers. The student is then expected to become a tutor to other students (and even adults) interested in learning the topic he/she has masters. This way, students learn both the content they study and the instructional practice as tutors. The knowledge generated becomes the common property of all the parties involved and is made available to tutors and students in other schools.

Over time, students and tutors participate in the construction of a broad fund of knowledge that is made available, through networked relationships, to everyone who participates. This model disrupts the familiar patterns of school; knowledge ceases to be the sole preserve of teachers, learning becomes a collaborative practice among tutors and students, and students become active agents not only in deciding what they will learn but also in bringing their learning into their relationships with adults and other students. Students become creators of knowledge as well as consumers of it. Adults learn the practice of tutorials the same way students do: by becoming students to tutors who master topics they seek to learn and then practicing as tutors of others interested in learning the topics they have now mastered. In a similar fashion to what one would observe in an artisanal workshop, where the expert practice of the master artisan is made visible all the time to apprentices, in a tutorial network, apprentices have permanent access to the expert practice of independent learning and tutoring, which are continuously modeled by tutors with higher degrees of expertise (López & Rincón-Gallardo, 2003).

In this paper, I organize the practice of Tutorial Relationships in into seven guiding principles. These principles ground TR pedagogy and practice but may take different forms according to various cultural and structural contexts. It is also important to note that each principle works in cohesion and builds on the other to collectively bring deep academic learning and at times, personal transformation in those who work in it. Students are part of a network of learning and draw others in in their role as tutors. Through TR, a Learning Community is created, a community sharing Brown’s First Principles of Learning: Student Agency, Reflection, Collaboration, Culture, Deep Disciplinary Content and Developmental Corridors (Brown, 1995, 1997; Brown and Campione, 1994, 1996).

7 Principles in Tutorial Relationships- Based on research in Mexico, (Ng, 2012)

1) Choice of Learning Project and Seeding Generative Ideas
2) Dialogue to Guide Student Research- Cultivating Self-Directed Learning (SDL)
3) Metacognition and Reflection on the Learning Process – Learning to Learn
4) Personal attention and individualized learning – Differentiated Instruction
5) Community Discourse and Public Demonstrations – Creating Shared Learning Culture
6) Learning to tutor – Collaborative Learning (CoL) and Values Education
7) Academic exchanges

Principle 1: Choice of Learning Project based on interest and Seeding Generative Ideas

Based on their intrinsic interests, students or tutees have the liberty to choose an authentic¹ learning project after being offered a range of options within or across subjects. Examples of learning projects include a critique of an English poem or passage, understanding division of fractions, designing a fish or a quest to understand the human digestive system. The opportunity to choose a learning project within a subject or topic is an incentive for students to participate and buy-in to the learning process.

As the learning community grows and as students become more familiar with the idea of learning projects, they can work together with teachers to create their own lines of inquiry to explore even more in depth congruent triangles or Pythagoras theorem.

Principle 2: Dialogue to Guide Student Research – Cultivating Self-Directed Learning

Learning projects are explored through thoughtful questioning that checks, solidifies and builds upon students' prior knowledge for deep understanding and mastery of concepts and ideas. Along this line of inquiry, guided by their teacher/tutor, students work as researchers and use their textbooks and other materials as resources to observe patterns, experiment, discover and understand fundamental concepts of that field or topic. This may come in the form of a learning activity or begin with a problem that scaffolds and structures the student's learning trajectory. Inquiry-based learning has proven to help student get a better grasp of fundamental processes (White and Frederickson, 1997, 1998) as compared to traditional methods. The pair engages in continues the dialogue until the tutor determines that the tutee has achieved the learning outcomes.

The end goal for every student is autonomy in learning where students ultimately learn how to learn for themselves (Cámara, 1999, 2003). In tutorial relationships, it is imperative that students learn the tools to investigate an issue using resources and problem-solve on their own, and subsequently the practice of guiding another student to learn those same skills. Students are given ownership of not only their own learning but for the learning of their classmates.

Principle 3: Metacognition and Reflection - Learning to Learn with Critical Thinking Skills

In TR, metacognition happens at two levels. First, students are trained to keep a learning log or a "register" of their steps as they learn. Students are encouraged to make mistakes and to learn from them to create knowledge. There is deliberate self-reflection, critical inquiry and conscious control of their learning environments. Students take more ownership of their desired learning outcomes and know how to achieve them (Brown, 1992). This is similar to what Schoenfeld (1983, 1985) labels post-mortem analysis where individual students explain the process by which they solved

¹ Galileo Education Network on Discipline-Based Inquiry Rubric, 2013, www.galileo.org/research/publications/rubric.pdf

their homework problems. Or in other literature, students generate an “abstracted replay” of their own problem-solving process and use this to critique their work, paying attention to their critical decisions or actions during the learning process (Collins et al., 1985). Metacognition helps students be highly aware of how they learn and be able to make the necessary modifications to learn better (Brown and Campione, 1987, 1990, 1996). Teaching practices using metacognition focus on sense-making, self-assessment and reflection on what worked and what needs improving (Bransfort et al, 2000). However it is important that teachers model this and guide the reflection process for their students (Brown, 1992; Brown & Campione, 1994; Brown & Campione, 1996). These practices have been shown to increase the degree to which students transfer their learning to new settings and events (Palinscar and Brown, 1984; Scardamalia et al., 1984; Schoenfeld, 1983, 1985, 1991).

On the second level, the application of metacognitive skills transcend individual students to the whole class as a community, keeping students responsible for monitoring and, if necessary, correcting their peers (Brown & Campione, 1994). This has been powerful in similar approaches such as Reciprocal Teaching developed by Palinscar and Brown (1984) to teach reading comprehension strategies and students teach and evaluate one another. As noted by Flavell (2000), it is not how or how often people use their minds in similar situations that is of primary interest but an individual’s understanding of another person’s mind that is key when developing a child’s theory of mind. Through constant metacognition of themselves and of others, students learn to be creative and innovative thinkers, one of identified 21st Century Competencies (21CCs) required for today’s world.

Principle 4: Personal attention for individualized learning and flexibility of time – Differentiated Instruction

One of the most human and fundamental parts of the tutorial relationships is that each learning project is tailored to the student’s prior knowledge and ability level. Learning is differentiated in a personalized dialogue, making sure each student reaches high quality analysis and understanding in their chosen learning project. The responsibility of “teaching” is distributed among the members of the classroom, making one-on-one attention possible in the classroom (Cámara et.al, 2003; López y Rincón Gallardo, 2003). This ensures every single one is learning and understanding the material before they are able to move on as much as possible within reasonable time constraints.

Principle 5: Creating Community Discourse through Public Demonstrations – Shared Learning Culture

At the end of the term, students usually come together for a public demonstration or sharing of learning projects completed during that term. This is an opportunity for the tutee to share what they learned with a larger learning community usually consisting of classmates and family members, sometimes including academic authorities or other visitors. Preparing for the demonstration can seem a daunting process at the beginning but guided by their teachers, students slowly garner more confidence and courage to speak in front of the public. The demonstration for a tutee is a mark of accomplishment at the end of each learning project and plays an important role in building the self-confidence of a student. It teaches a student to organize his or her thoughts and build up interest in the class as learning and passion are shared. This is an important part in creating firstly a shared learning experience in the classroom and establishing a culture of continual learning in community.

Principle 6: Learning to Tutor – Collaborative Learning and Values Education

Probably the most exciting part of the tutorial relationships model is that the call of every tutee is to then learn to become a tutor after completing their learning project. Teachers guide their students as they create their own teaching guide and prepare them to tutor. Students/ tutees learn the instructional practice of tutoring by tutoring and by being exposed to others who master it (Rincón-Gallardo, in publishing; López y Rincón-Gallardo, 2003). They get better as tutors by practicing the art of tutoring and are exposed to more styles of teaching and learning as they do so.

Everyone in the network plays and shifts between the two roles of tutee and tutor. The expectation of every tutee is much greater; their role is not just to learn, but to learn well enough so that they can share and teach it to someone else. Thus students take more pride in their work – the opportunity to teach is the best opportunity to learn – and teachers have a higher goal of making each student a great tutor. Along with the ability to be researchers and take charge of their own learning, this shared responsibility to learn and teach recognizes the inner capacities of each child and makes them great learners for life. Teachers too must learn to place responsibility and trust in even their lower-ability students and the classroom becomes a space for true collaboration, peer accountability and shared knowledge.

Redefining the teacher's role: Although boosting students' agency is advocated for, there still must be a balance between teacher and student accountability in the classroom (Brown, 1992). On one hand, teachers resign from their authoritative status in the classroom and instead, guide learning and model critical thinking and methods of inquiry (Brown & Campione, 1990; Brown, 1992). On the other hand, teachers must develop a sound sense of judgment to differentiate among when the students need help to avoid misconceptions, when they are ready to take on more advanced topics, or when they should be left on their own (Brown, 1992; Brown & Campione, 1994). Teachers, or primary content knowledge experts, are coaches and indispensable actors in the learning process. Without their support and monitoring, students are in the danger of developing misconceptions about the topic of inquiry or they would make minor progress after achieving certain degrees of expertise.

Teachers are not expected to know the answers to all questions; rather, they should become inquiry role models who are competent in identifying problem areas and can effectively locate and connect students to various sources of knowledge and expertise (Brown, 1992; Brown & Campione, 1994, Brown and Campione, 1996).

Principle 7: Academic Exchanges

The last principle is that the learning in school extends beyond school wall and students are able to go out to teach others outside the classroom. For many, this is a great motivating force for both teachers and students as their work in the classroom is validated externally. These academic exchanges are real opportunities to first, spread and strengthen the students as tutors, share values through it and feel part of a larger movement as we build a community of learners who are united by the practice tutorial relationships and the skills that come with being a tutor.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude with the reflection of Professor Richard Elmore (2011), who visited the Learning Community working in TR in México.

Since my return from Mexico, I have thought many times about my geometry lesson with María Cruz in Santa Rosa. I am currently spending at least two, sometimes three, days a week visiting classrooms in American schools as part of my work on school improvement. Since my lesson with María, I have probably visited between forty and fifty classrooms in ten schools, mostly urban, mostly low-performing. The people in these schools are working hard. They are trying to do what they think people in positions of power and authority want them to do—whether they think it is the right thing to do or not. In the classrooms I visit, I cannot hear students when they speak (I cannot remember the last time I heard a student speak clearly and audibly in an American public school classroom). I routinely observe teachers talking over the top of students when the students are trying to explain what they know. I routinely hear teachers finishing students' sentences and "explaining" assignments to students before the students have had an opportunity to think about them. I routinely see "Do Nows" on the board in the front of classrooms that have no relationship to the content being taught in the class and no explanation for why the work is being done. I see academic tasks that require students to fill in worksheets with prompts that are drawn directly from released items on state tests. I see students reading texts that have been chopped into discrete chunks and packaged into thick textbooks, rather than choosing what to read and explaining why. I see students writing paragraphs to a formula that they will never use again once they have answered the open response questions on the state test. I have observed teachers in teams talking about student performance on discrete assessment items without reference to the knowledge domain that the items are designed to measure. María is my constant companion in these classrooms these days. She reminds me of how much our well-intentioned work is disabling a generation of American students around the fundamental work of learning to learn.

As I observe these things, which have now become the staple of "school improvement practice" in American schools, María is a vivid presence—her confidence and poise as a tutor, her wry commentary on my shaky grasp of the origins of pi, her relationships with her tutors and the other eleven students in her school, her strong voice, her level gaze and eye contact when she speaks to adults, her quiet courage and joy as a learner. I also think about the proud parents assembled in the dusty front yard of a tiny two-room school in the middle of nowhere, with pickup trucks and horses tethered nearby, listening to one of their children speak as an expert about a complex math problem, with pride and a bit of incomprehension that this could be happening to their child. When I think about María, I think, "someone had the audacity to believe that this thirteen-year-old girl could take control of her own learning and someone tried to figure out how to make that happen, not just for María but for hundreds of other young people like her, and, more audaciously, for the adults whom María looks to for guidance in her learning." That's something worth thinking about.

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