Improve your Tutoring skills: A guide for students

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Tutoring, working one on one with a student or a small group of students (usually school students) to help them develop specific skills, can be very rewarding. It can also be a flexible way to earn money, develop your own skills and gain valuable references.

However, it is a responsible role and you should only consider becoming a tutor if you have a genuine passion for the subject and want to share it with your students. In addition, you must have good interpersonal skills and relate well with young people.

What do students (and their parents) expect of a tutor?

It is very important to clarify, both for your student and yourself, exactly what your role will be. You need to clearly establish what the student, and his or her family, expects of you, and what they consider to be the purpose of the tutorials. You also need to have a clear idea of your own strengths and limitations and what skills or knowledge you can offer as a tutor.

It's useful to discuss this as early as possible. Try to narrow this down to tasks that can be talked of in terms of objectives regarding specific content or study methods to be taught. In this way it will be easier for you to evaluate your success (and help your student see his / her own success).

You also have "professional" obligations as a tutor. These include being punctual, reliable and well prepared.

Administrative considerations

Clarify the details of your employment as soon as you can, preferably before the first session. This will help to avoid any potentially embarrassing situations that could arise later. Issues to be clarified include:
- **Scheduling**: What is an appropriate time for tutoring? Will it be at the same time each week?
- **Cost:** What is the cost per session? How and when is payment to be made? Weekly after the session, or monthly? Is payment to be by cash or cheque?
- **Location:** Where will the tutoring take place? (Preferably somewhere quiet away from the rest of the family).
- **Length of Employment**: How long is tutoring to continue? Is this a one off session for a specific assignment, for a term, for the academic year?
- **Mutual obligations:** What is the protocol if either party needs to cancel the session at short notice?

Practical Teaching Tips:

Use questions to enhance teaching

Questioning can be useful to establish rapport, build confidence, find what a student knows or to share experiences. Recognize and use different types of questions:

Closed questions can be useful for finding out information, and can provide of structure to a situation, BUT they can result in a yes/no answer that leaves you none the wiser.

For example: Do you like maths / computers / writing essays?

It's possible to emotionally load the question so heavily that people are pressured into lying to you to save face.

The following questions are all closed questions that are likely to receive a negative, or defensive, reply.

Can't you do this exercise?
Have you finished all the Homework I gave you?
You must know how to do logs!
Haven't you done referencing!

Be sensitive to your student and avoid using questions to point out deficits.

Open-ended questions stimulate a longer response than one syllable or one word. Open questions encourage discussion, exploration of ideas, and sharing. It's also important to ask questions that are non-directive - the student should not feel pressured into answering in a particular way. The use of open ended questioning techniques to get students to reflect on their own work, can assist students to improve their understanding and become more independent learners

For example

Instead of "*Haven't you done your Homework yet*?" how about "*What's the Homework situation?"*

Use questions as an opportunity to build up confidence -
"*You're really good at long division, how do you feel about multiplication?"*

Try to create a context in which students will feel like sharing their concerns -
"*I always hated doing book reviews, what instructions have you been given?"*

Questions need to be asked at an appropriate level. Easy questions may be considered patronising and questions that are too difficult may be threatening. Lack of response to a question may indicate poor phrasing of the question, rather than a lack of understanding on the student's part. If in doubt, try rephrasing the question.

Allow an adequate time for a student to respond to a question, even if this involves an awkward period of silence, rather than jumping in and providing the answer. A big part of your role as a tutor is listening to the student. Encourage him or her to talk about their knowledge and study issues.

Finally, respond warmly, naturally and positively to all student answers. If a response is inadequate, it may be possible to praise part of the answer while also indicating sections which need further elaboration or correction. Students should also feel comfortable to ask questions. A two-way dialogue is indicative of a positive relationship between the tutor and student.

Assist Learning by demonstrating skills

Model styles of thinking, analytical and critical reading, argumentation or problem solving in your field. This can include:
- modelling ways of presenting material, *eg. Structure of an essay, method of setting out a problem*
- different writing styles *eg. reflective and personal vs analytical and objective*
- different types of evidence *eg. an example to illustrate a point vs. reference to a primary source.*
- the use of vocabulary specific to the subject. *eg. alliteration, irony, satire*
- Discuss appropriate referencing procedures eg. *footnotes, Harvard system, how to incorporate references into text.*

Review a range of model answers and demonstrate the style and standard of work expected.

Provide Quality Feedback and evaluation

All students gain from continual evaluation. For students who lack confidence, constructive feedback on their work will really help progress.
From the general ("*well done"; "that's great"; "you're really good at that*") to the specific ("*that paragraph was very effective*"; "*good choice of words"; "you have a prodigious knowledge of place value!")*

Evaluation is an important part of your teaching. Both you and your student need to feel you are progressing. Make regular checks of your student's performance against the objectives you have set.

eg. improved writing skills, knowledge of topics, improvement in spelling, increased complexity in sentence structure, vocab development, or problem solving abilities.
If the student's parents are paying the bills, it's also important you provide this feedback to parents also (with your student's permission of course).

It's also essential to monitor and evaluate your own performance as a tutor. Students expect:
- Clear statements of what they are expected to achieve.
- Constructive feedback on their work and how it can be improved.
- Respect for their ideas and efforts
- Encouragement and reassurance
- Critical constructive advice, with respect for their feelings

Planning a Tutoring Session

Determine at what level the student is working.

To become confident and motivated students need to feel that they are capable of what is expected of them. Start from the level at the student is at, rather than where you think he or she should be. Ask questions about the subject, look at examples of the student's work, or work together to complete exercises to build confidence.

Set realistic objectives and Learning outcomes for each session.

It is important that you as tutor break down large assignments, or difficult concepts, into tasks that are easily achievable by the student. You should set objectives for the specific learning outcomes for each session. What do you want the student to learn in this session? Focus on concepts rather than on addressing covering content.

A learning outcome may be a statement of what you expect the student to understand or be able to do at the completion of a tutoring session. Do your objectives cover a range of skills and understandings, rather than just content?

Prepare

An effective tutor needs to be prepared. What teaching resources will you need? Do you need to pre read a novel, become familiar with a particular textbook, current media issues or area of content? What kinds of activities are likely to lead to the learning outcomes you hope for? Do you need to prepare follow up questions or problems to set for homework?

Plan the environment.

Conduct the session in a more formal or less used part of the house, such as on the dining room, where there is a good working environment with few distractions.

Conducting a tutorial session in a place where you are likely to be interrupted by other family members, for example the kitchen table, or family room, may not be conducive to effective learning or teaching. On the other hand, conducting a tutorial in a private space, such as at the students desk in his or her bedroom, may lead to such an informal atmosphere that little work is achieved either.

Plan the conclusion.

Plan how to finish the session, rather than continuing to work for all of the allotted time and then finishing abruptly. Manage your time so that you can formally draw the session to a close and end on a constructive note:
- Summarise what you have covered in the time.
- Clarify what you'd like to do at the next session.
- Indicate what preparation you'd like the student to do before the next session.

Keep Professional Records

Record details of your tutoring sessions, particularly if you are tutoring more than one student. An exercise book is fine for this purpose. Include the date of the session, what you planned to cover, what you actually covered, suggested follow up ideas and a record of progress. This record can be useful if disputes arise over incomplete work, lost drafts or inadequate preparation by either you or the student.

The First session

The first session will establish the tone and way in which the tutorial session will operate in the future, so it's important to adopt a professional approach. It is important to get to know your student and. his or her interests and background. Share information about your own interests to help you develop a relationship. If you spend time finding out about the things they enjoy doing, the things they feel good about doing and where they lack confidence, then students will feel more relaxed and confident in your company.

However, if you spend **most** of the first session talking about football, TV shows or fashion then it is highly likely that your student will expect this pattern to continue in subsequent sessions which are unlikely to be productive. Similarly, your students are not likely to feel confident about working with you if you launch straight into dealing with content without spending time to get to know them.

It is important to set the ground rules for how the tutoring session will proceed, and to establish each other's expectations. Write these down so you can refer to them at a later date if necessary. Emphasise the importance of and responsibility for preparation and participation by the student.

At this time it is also appropriate to review the aims, objectives and assumptions or methodologies relevant to the topic or assignment and how it fits in with the overall themes and structure of the course.

Successful communication is the key to successful tutoring. Talk about what you'd like to be called and clarify what the students would like to be called. This is especially important for students, or parents, from other cultures who may prefer a more formal relationship with a tutor, rather than being on a first name basis as would be usual for an Australian student.

Work to establish a learning environment that involves mutual trust and where your student feels comfortable asking questions, discussing issues or questioning explanations. Students need to be able to feel they can speak openly, and to be able to ask questions without fear of being humiliated.

Be aware on your non-verbal behaviour. Speak calmly, enunciate clearly, make good eye contact. Remember to SMILE often. Adopt an open, approachable posture; don't cross your arms or legs; sitting next to your student rather than across the table will encourage you to work with the student.

Teaching Strategies for Tutoring Students from Non English speaking Backgrounds

Cultural Awareness

A student may indicate understanding or agreement simply to appear polite or to "save face", He or she may also be hesitant to initiate conversation or to interrupt you, but will wait to be formally invited to speak.

Appropriate language.

Simplify sentence structure by using direct questions. Avoid using colloquialisms, "*Great idea. That will kill two birds with one stone,*"

or idiomatic speech, eg "*footy*".

Write explicit formal instructions in addition to verbal instructions. Paraphrase often and check for meaning by re-phrasing and using open questions. Use visual aids where appropriate.

Avoid sarcasm, and jokes which involve irony and satire as your students may interpret what you say literally. The point of such jokes is usually lost on NESB students as the humour relies on understandings of double meanings in English.

Awareness of NVC

Appreciate the role of non-verbal signals in other cultures. For example, smiling may mask embarrassment and unease. Although in Australia we value direct eye contact, in some cultures it is considered to be rude or impolite.

Working with VCE students

VCE students are often highly motivated, and consequently can be very demanding of a tutor.

How much should you help?

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many students expect the tutor to do the work for them. This is less likely to occur if you have set clear objectives and guidelines at the beginning of your tutoring sessions. Focus your objectives on the teaching of specific skills: developing argument, using topic sentences and linking sections, problem solving, addressing the criteria.

It is inappropriate to re-word or re-write sections of a student's draft which appear lacking, or to provide interpretation of data, content or concepts not already undertaken by the student.

The VCE guidelines have very strict rules regarding the authentication of work, and you should familiarise yourself with these provisions:

Board of Studies rules

1. Students must ensure that all unacknowledged work submitted for Coursework is genuinely their own.
2. Students must acknowledge all resources used, including:
   - text and source material
   - the name(s) and status of any person(s) who provided assistance and the type of assistance provided.

3. Students must not receive undue assistance from any other person in the preparation and submission of work.

4. Acceptable levels of assistance include:
- the incorporation of ideas or material derived from other sources (e.g. by reading, viewing or notetaking) but which has been
- transformed by the student and used in a new context
- prompting and general advice from another person or source which leads to refinements and/or self-correction.

5. Unacceptable forms of assistance include:
- use of, or copying of, another person's work or other resources without acknowledgment,
- actual corrections or improvements made or dictated by another person.

6. Students must not submit the same piece of work for assessment more than once.

7. Students who knowingly assist other students in a Breach of Rules may be penalised.

8. Students must sign the Declaration of Authenticity at the time of submitting the completed task. This declaration states that all unacknowledged work is the student's own. Students must also sign a general declaration that they will observe the rules and instructions for the VCE, and accept disciplinary provisions.

For further information: http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/

Working with more junior students

Working with younger students can be very rewarding, but also very different, from working with VCE students. Such students are likely to have experienced difficulties at school and consequently may have low self esteem and be lacking in confidence. You will need to be especially patient, supportive and positive. Be aware that students who have a history of academic difficulties may have a specific learning difficulty and will need specialized assistance from a person skilled in this area.

We are all Individuals.

Do not assume that your students will understand and process information in the same way as you do. We all learn in different ways:

Visual Learning - learning by seeing the material. This means that written work, maps, graphs and pictures help the work to be remembered.

Auditory Learning- learning by hearing the material. Work that is explained or read aloud will be remembered best.

Understanding the whole idea - this student needs to have the whole idea described and explained in order to have the best grasp of an idea.

Partializing the idea - some student need to have the information broken down into small parts, and to learn one part at a time.

Observation - Learning by watching another person do the task.

Experience- some people learn best by "hands on" experience which then helps them to work out the basic, more abstract, idea.

Overview of the concept first- some students prefer to know what the abstract and general issues are, and what ideas are to be explored, before they get specifically involved in problem solving.

Although as a tutor you will not be expected to be an expert in different learning styles, it is important that you recognize that some students learn differently and that this may impact upon the way you teach. As you get to know your students you will know how he or she learns best.

In practice this may mean that where a concept is still not clear to a student after you have explained it carefully. You may then need to review that work in a different way, either by using concrete examples, by applying the theory to a practical situation, using visual representations, demonstrating a process or breaking a concept down into smaller parts. Students at VCE level usually understand and accommodate their own learning needs, but this is not the situation with younger students.

For more information about learning styles:
* www.kiersey.com
* www.d.umn.edu/student/loon/acad/strat/lrnsty.html

Trouble Shooting

Know the limitations of your role and skills.

Knowing what your role is and where the limitations of your responsibility are, will help you in difficult situations. As a student subject tutor you are not a special education teacher, psychologist, or social worker. Many problems arise from wrong expectations. If the student (or his or her parents) expect you to provide something beyond the responsibilities of your role you can often feel responsible, even when you're not responsible.
Speak and act from your agreed understanding of your role and not from any wish to be friends from the parties concerned.

Evaluate your own performance as a tutor

The following checklist of questions may provide a useful starting point to reflect on your own teaching practice and may help you to identify your strengths and areas to be improved:

- Was I adequately prepared and familiar with the material to be taught?
- Did I have a lesson plan prepared before the session?
- Did the plan work? If not, why not? If not was I able to adapt flexibly?
- What were the most successful and least successful aspects of the class?
- Would I do it differently if I were teaching this again?
- Did the session cover essential concepts or did I get sidetracked?
- Did I try and deal with too much?
- Was the student prepared? If not, how can I encourage him or her to be better prepared in future?
- Who did most of the talking in the session?
- Did I draw things together at the end of the session?

Further Reading

Tutoring and Demonstrating at the University of Melbourne
Richard James and Gabrielle Baldwin
CSHE 1997

Tutoring Across Cultures
Joanna Rochfort and Anne Blanchard
Curtain University of Technology 1996

Learning to Teach in Higher Education
Paul Ramsden
Routledge 1992

The Culture-Inclusive Classroom
Amanda Sinclair and Valerie Britton Wilson
Melbourne Business School 1999