

Wearing Two Hats: Things Educational Interpreters Need to Know When They Tutor

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Abstract

The greatest demand for interpreters is in education; however, many graduates of interpreter training programs are not specifically prepared for educational interpreting and have little or no training in tutoring. This presentation will focus on the requirements, qualifications and skills needed by interpreters who tutor. Tulsa Community College, through PEC funding, has developed a tutoring course/workshop that addresses the basic theories, guidelines, principles and practices of tutoring. The presentation will examine learning styles and metacognitive theories as they apply to tutoring. Emphasis will be placed on preparing students for three types of tutoring sessions: studying content, preparing for a test, and writing a paper.

Course Development and Administrative Considerations

Identifying the Need

Tulsa Community College (TCC) has a relatively long history of program development for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. The Resource Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (RCDHH) was established in 1979 and has subsequently grown to include eleven full time staff members serving approximately 40 students on four campuses. Our experience, like that of many other post-secondary programs that serve students who are

deaf or hard of hearing, indicates that tutoring can make an enormous contribution to student success. Although programs differ in the ways in which they recruit tutors, many use interpreters as tutors at least some of the time. However, a highly qualified and skilled interpreter, even one who is familiar with the course material, may not be well prepared as a tutor. As a result, we decided to look into what we could do to help our interpreters enhance their tutoring skills.

Addressing the Need

Since Tulsa Community College has an interpreter preparation program in addition to RCDHH, it seemed natural to ask that a tutoring course be added to the curriculum. TCC has a fairly simple mechanism to allow courses to be added on a provisional basis, so we opted to go that route. However, we realized that many of our working interpreters would not be able to attend a formal, sixteen-week or even eight-week course. Therefore, we decided that any curriculum we recommended needed to be flexible enough to be offered as either a credit course or as a workshop, preferably one that earned continuing education units for the interpreters.

With those decisions made and with PEC's funding support, we turned our attention to staffing and curriculum design. To develop the curriculum, we contracted with Teres Brawner, a nationally certified interpreter and Tulsa area educator for the deaf with experience on both secondary and postsecondary levels.

Implementing the Solution

Our main goal for training interpreters as tutors was to improve the quality of our tutoring service. To further that goal we looked at several factors beyond the actual training itself. We checked our policies and procedures to make sure they were easy to understand and follow and that no unnecessary policies were in place. In addition, we evaluated our working conditions for tutors. We are very fortunate in that our department has a large open work space as well as several private tutoring rooms for part time tutors and a private office for each of our four full time interpreters. In addition, over the years we have found a number of ways to obtain free or low cost textbooks for interpreters and tutors; we checked to make sure these methods were working as well as we thought they were. We also checked to make sure our part time tutors have access to the Learning Resources Center and to the computer labs.

Evaluating the Solution

Since Tutoring for Fundamentals is a new curriculum, we do not yet have significant feedback on it. Our plan is to use the college's usual course and workshop evaluations in order to obtain information on tutors' perceptions of the curriculum. However, we believe that a more interesting and important side of the equation will be to determine whether or not the training makes a difference in student performance. In other words, we want to know if tutors who receive this training really are more effective than tutors who do not. We hope the evaluations we ask the students to complete on their tutors will give us some insight into this.

Tutoring Fundamentals Curriculum

In response to the established need for training in tutoring, TCC, with PEC, contracted with Teres Brawner (MS, CI & CT, CED), an experienced educator on both the secondary and postsecondary levels, to prepare a curriculum to meet the needs we identified. We asked that the curriculum be flexible to be used as three hour for credit course, as an independent study, or as a workshop. Ms. Brawner developed a curriculum entitled "Tutoring Fundamentals: A Course for Potential Tutors."

Tutoring Fundamentals is divided into six units of study: Learning Styles, Metacognition, Writing and Reading, Tutoring Theory, Tutoring Practice, and Tutoring Resources.

Unit One: Learning Styles

A quick Internet search for "learning styles" yields a variety of instruments from very sophisticated tests which require training to administer to snappy pop-psychology questionnaires. We needed an instrument that was relatively reliable but simple and inexpensive to work with so our tutors could administer it themselves at a time and place that was convenient to them and to their students. In addition, we needed it to be self-scoring and able to yield scores that would be readily understandable by our tutors and students. We wanted something that a tutor and student could sit down with together and use to work out learning strategies for a specific course.

Tutoring Fundamentals recommends the VARK, an on-line instrument developed by Neil Fleming and Charles C. Bonwell. Because the VARK is available free at <www.active-learning-site.com>, tutors and students do not need our permission or help to use it, may use it as many times as they feel is appropriate, and can take it whenever and wherever they have Internet access. Administering the inventory is simple and straightforward, and the Active Learning web site includes a variety of tips and strategies for using the results in real life learning situations. In addition, the VARK is specifically designed to initiate the kind of discussion about learning that we hoped to encourage between students and tutors.

Unit Two: Metacognition

Conversation between a tutor and a student about the student's personal learning process can be an important step toward developing the metacognitive awareness that so many students lack. Tutoring Fundamentals gives tutors specific questions to ask students to help them think about the ways in which they think and learn. One of the biggest frustrations tutors report is that students misrepresent their level of understanding. We found that students themselves are often unaware that they do not fully understand material that has been presented to them. As a result, tutors have difficulty evalu-

ating the effectiveness of tutoring strategies until a test or graded project reveals the lack of mastery. Responding to simple questions such as, “How do you know if you understand something?” can spur a student to a new level of metacognitive awareness and help circumvent this kind of unnecessary poor result. In addition, Tutoring Fundamentals offers strategies to help students improve their ability to break an assignment into smaller tasks, to attack each task effectively, and to monitor their own progress. This curriculum shows tutors ways to model these strategies and to discuss them with students so the students can eventually learn to use the strategies independently. Finally, the curriculum helps tutors work with students to link prior knowledge and experience to new knowledge in order to formulate a context for further learning and personal growth.

Unit Three: Writing and Reading

Although Tutoring Fundamentals was primarily developed with students in interpreter preparation courses in mind, we recognize that other tutors also work with our students. As a result, the curriculum includes a brief treatment of the effects of early language deprivation, age of onset, and level of hearing loss on reading and writing. Students in interpreter preparation courses most likely have already been exposed to this information, but for other tutors the information may be unfamiliar.

In addition, the curriculum discusses basic strategies for talking about writing, for critiquing writing fairly but sensitively, and for working with instructors of writing courses and other courses in which writing is important. Potential tutors discuss various factors that may contribute to a deaf or hard of hearing student’s discomfort with writing and academic factors that may help determine the kind and level of intervention appropriate for the class. For example, writing instructors may need to see the student’s rough draft in order to diagnose and prescribe remediation. In these courses, the tutor probably needs to work closely under the instructor’s guidance. However, many other instructors are not particularly interested in the student’s writing difficulties and evaluate papers solely on content. In these courses, stu-

dents and tutors may be able to work back and forth between signing and writing to get the content down on paper.

The bulk of this part of the curriculum uses a wide variety of actual student writing samples for practice in determining how much intervention is appropriate, identifying errors, and working with students to correct errors.

Unit Four: Tutoring Theory

This unit discusses expectations which tutors and students bring into the tutoring session. In doing so, it establishes a minimal threshold of responsibility on both sides. When both sides meet this threshold, the tutoring session is much more likely to be successful than if one or both sides fall short. Tutors should be able to expect that students will seek help before they become hopelessly confused, will schedule reasonable time to accomplish academic tasks, and will make small accommodations in communication styles, if necessary to make the session run smoothly. On the other hand, students should be able to expect that tutors know the material, are available at times which meet the students’ own schedule, and will make small accommodations in communications styles if necessary to make the session run smoothly.

In the ideal tutoring session, the student takes responsibility for his or her learning. He or she should arrive with specific concerns and with basic background knowledge. Moreover, the student should have made an independent attempt to resolve the identified concern. Additional characteristics of the ideal tutoring sessions are clear communication, a well prepared tutor, realistic expectations on what can be accomplished in a single session, and satisfaction with the outcome on both sides.

At the beginning of a student’s academic career, many tutoring sessions will probably be far from ideal. The tutor may need to assume a high level of responsibility for the planning and outcome of each tutoring session. However, as the student progresses academically, he or she should begin to assume more and more responsibility until finally many tutoring sessions approach the ideal with the student assuming all or most of the responsibility for determining the course of each session.

Unit Five: Tutoring Practice

Tutoring Fundamentals identifies three basic types of tutoring sessions and discusses strategies for achieving good outcomes for each type. The types are studying for content, preparing for a test, and writing a paper. The curriculum discusses ways in which to tap into learning styles, stimulate metacognition, and move students toward accepting more responsibility for their own learning in the course of each type of session.

For example, during a session in which the student needs to study content, the tutor may ask the student to briefly recall learning strategies most appropriate for his or her learning style and help the student plan a strategy for the task at hand. The tutor may use the metacognition questions to help the student discover his or her level of background knowledge and consider ways in which the information at hand may be useful or important. Finally, the tutor may model SQ3R or another basic study method for the first part of the lesson and gradually encourage the student to take over more and more responsibility for tak-

ing and organizing reading notes, compiling vocabulary lists, developing study guides and other study aids, and so on.

Unit Six: Tutoring Resources

The final unit of the course is a listing of print and on-line resources for tutors. This list will require frequent updating as new materials are continually published both in print and on-line.

References

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