



Peer Tutoring: A Route to Leadership

An Action Research Report

In the past, Upper Canada College, an independent boys' school in Toronto, struggled to maintain a strong peer-tutoring program. For many years the College offered *The Lab*, a Tuesday/Thursday lunch-time drop-in program, housed in classrooms and staffed by senior students who earned community service hours toward their graduation diploma for the time they spent tutoring. We found that, due to the program's drop-in nature, younger students were often intimidated when approaching the group of senior boys to ask for support. Its casual nature resulted in a lack of visibility and made accountability hard to measure. As the adult supervision was cursory, there was no way to be sure the recorded community service hours matched actual tutoring hours. A feeling of apathy surrounded the collection of hours, resulting in an overall lack of respect for the program. Perhaps most importantly, the drop-in aspect did not allow tutoring relationships to develop, leaving both tutors and tutees dissatisfied. As a result, there was a high rate of attrition and the program had difficulty sustaining itself.

How can we resuscitate a faltering program?

The introduction to the College of the Wernham West Research Institute gave us an opportunity to systematically examine the existing peer-tutoring program. The Research Institute explores the benefits of using research models in the practice of teaching. Through action research, teachers are given an opportunity to implement best practice into their own programs, making changes based on findings in their research.

A review of peer-tutoring literature shows that academic gains for both the tutee and the tutor are the standard measure of tutoring success. Little is actually written about tutor satisfaction and its impact on the success of a program. What makes our research unique is that it studies the tutor's development through the program, not the tutee's. We hypothesized that tutor dissatisfaction resulted from our tutors feeling under-valued by our school community. We needed to find a way for them to feel that tutoring was a worthy endeavour and commit more readily to the program.

While pondering this problem, our school embraced a Prefect Leadership Program. We realized we had a unique opportunity to pair peer-tutoring with prefect leadership; thus we designed our research question: Does recruiting prefects as peer-tutors enhance tutor commitment and satisfaction? Do prefects value tutoring as a *leadership* role?

How can we start over?

The Lab actively recruited peer-tutors from the Prefect Program. Our tutors could now use their tutoring hours towards prefect leadership in addition to collecting community service hours.

In helping boys value their role as tutors, we realized it was important to establish a home for the program. The natural fit was the Wernham West Centre for Learning (the academic support centre for all boys at the College) as it is centrally located in a high-traffic

area. It is designed as a bright, comfortable space with access to computers, textbooks and support materials.

Using the Centre allowed us to meet a second mandate of our changing program, adult supervision. This significantly moved us away from the old casual drop-in program to a more formal learning environment, where students were required to sign in to verify their hours, as well as complete daily progress reports in the tutee's file. Additionally, an unexpected support came from teachers who would pop in to talk to their students while passing by the Centre.

Tutors were trained in strategies for teaching organization, note taking and study skills. Additional instruction was given in multiple intelligences and learning styles through a series of lunchtime workshops.

Tutors were given a choice of subjects, days and times in which to tutor. Tutoring pairs were then designed to highlight the academic strengths and interests of the tutors. All tutoring occurred in the Centre for Learning under the supervision of the Centre Coordinator, who was available for trouble-shooting purposes. There was, however, flexibility inside this structured approach. Students could choose to schedule their tutoring sessions for one hour Monday through Friday before school, at lunchtime or after school.

Accountability was maintained by having a sign-in book to record tutor hours. Tutors were required to meet for two one-hour sessions each week. Each hour was divided into 45 minutes of tutoring followed by 15 minutes for paper work. A three-strikes system was put in effect, holding tutors and tutees accountable to each other, since the peer-tutoring service would be discontinued after three unexplained missed appointments. After each missed session, tutors filled in a form to alert the tutee's academic adviser, thereby bringing another adult into the circle of support. Tutors also kept a daily tutoring log answering the following questions:

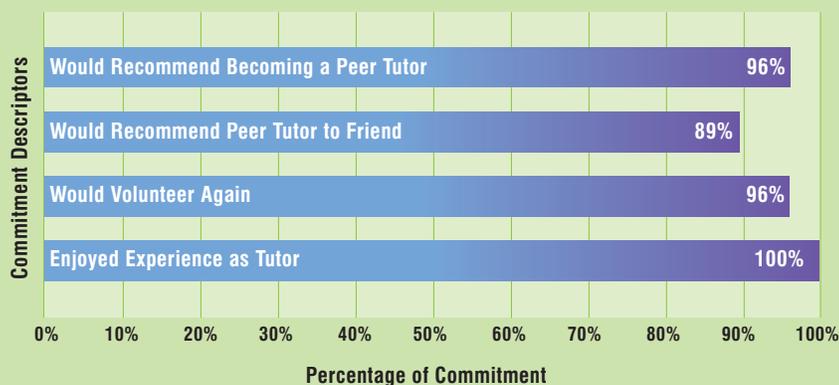
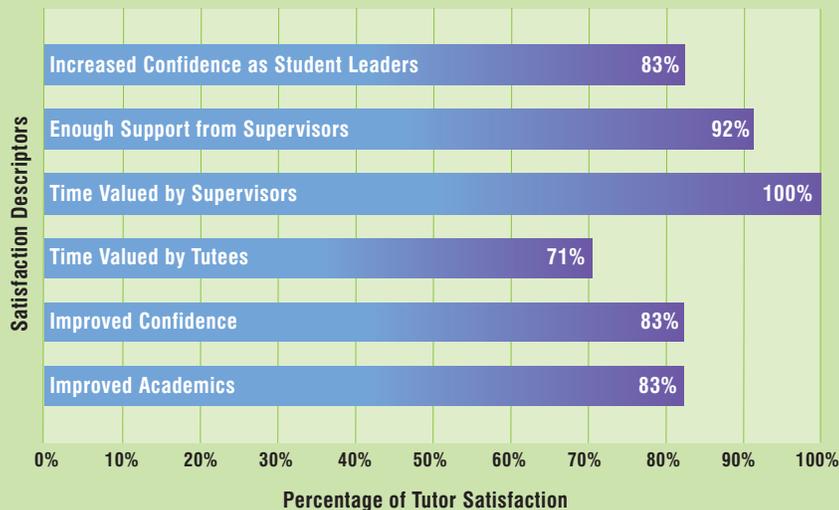
1. What did you work on today?
2. What is your plan for next time?

After every fourth session, tutors were required to contact the course teacher via e-mail with a progress report and/or specific questions. It was hoped that the connection of the tutor to the teacher would increase the sense of value and leadership. The tutee's adviser was copied on this report. At the end of each term, a reflection form was filed. Tutors were asked to respond to three prompts:

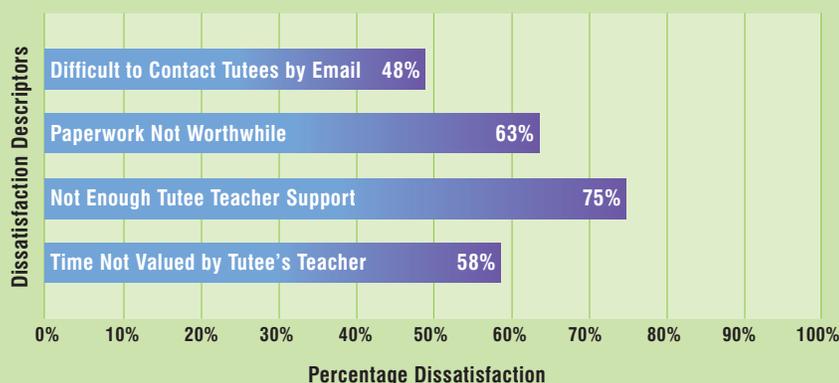
1. Describe your most satisfying tutoring experience this month.
2. If you could change anything about your tutoring experience this month, what would it be and how would you change it?
3. What have you learned about yourself as a tutor and about your own learning?

This was an opportunity for tutors to do some critical thinking and evaluate their tutoring experience. It also helped us identify areas for intervention. Finally, at the end of the school year, our tutors were asked to fill in a survey of tutor satisfaction.

TUTOR SATISFACTION



TUTOR DISSATISFACTION



Tutor commitments were formally recorded and recognized through personalized report card comments, letters of recommendation and prefect reports. These were tangible ways for our school community to show we value our peer-tutors. However, from an educational and ethical point of view, we were more interested in the less tangible results. What are the intrinsic rewards for the tutors? How do we measure them? What makes tutors want to keep coming back?

What have we learned?

Our empirical data showed the tutors were happy to have the program tightened up, because it gave them a sense that the work they were doing was valued. They also preferred being assigned to a single tutee for the whole year. This allowed relationships to develop and tutors felt responsible for their tutees' academic and social growth. Almost unanimously, our tutors told us they enjoyed

the tutoring experience, would do it again and would recommend the program to their friends. While the program was not without its frustrations, our research allowed us to identify and rectify problems immediately. For example, many tutors felt undervalued by their tutees' teachers and wanted them to respond more regularly to their progress reports. *The Lab* supervisors were asked to speak at a faculty meeting and explained to the teachers that the tutors placed high value on their comments and acknowledgments. Responses increased immediately. Tutors also felt that our new program demanded too much paperwork. In response, monthly reflections were cut back to term reflections. The final frustration was that it was difficult to contact tutees because the younger boys were not checking their school email accounts. This was remedied in two ways: tutors trained tutees to use their school account, and the first question asked of all enquires became "have you checked your email?" Our research allowed us to discover what was not working well and immediately implement change within the program. This had the added effect of showing our boys that we were listening to them and valued their opinions enough to take action. In essence, we allowed them to own the program.

The qualitative data also reflect many positive experiences that came out of the tutoring relationship. Many of the boys expanded their own learning through tutoring. One tutor reflected, "I was unsure of some French vocabulary that I thought I knew. I have now begun to read some vocabulary for a few minutes before bed most nights." Another said, "I found I was able to relearn things I had forgotten a long time ago." These are important academic lessons. However, the greatest lessons were moral victories. One boy reflected, "I have realized that it is possible for me to positively affect the lives of others. It might not have been a huge change, but I am glad I have made a difference." Another discovered, "Tutoring has become so much more than just a numerical figure on my community service report. Whether or not my work was credited, I was just happy to have done my part." These are character-building lessons – internal satisfactions that cannot be empirically measured. These life lessons develop good citizenship and the idea that one has a responsibility to give back to the community. These are the reasons that tutors returned the following year and the reasons that our program is now flourishing.

Finally, we believe we have made some significant observations. Generally, our tutors were good students who were not well known in the school. Tutoring through the prefect program gave students an opportunity to become leaders by building on their academic strengths. We watched tutors become friends as they found a home for themselves in the school. We saw tutors so at ease in the Centre, they would come in seeking academic support from the Coordinator for themselves. In addition, a handful of our senior tutors not only tutored in their strong subjects, but also asked to be paired with a tutor for a weaker subject. This is a remarkable leap forward in seeing the tutoring program as a valuable support system. Giving academic support made requesting that same support more acceptable.

What can we share?

We believe that the following checklist is important to consider when setting up a high school peer-tutoring program:

- The program needs to have its own space.
- This environment must always be viewed as a quiet working space.
- The space should be inviting and full of support resources.
- The room should always be monitored by an adult.

- Tutors need to be properly trained.
- Tutor hours must be recorded.
- Daily logs, progress reports and reflections must be filed.
- Content teachers must respond to tutor progress reports.
- Tutors must be recognized through personalized report card comments, community service hours, and letters of recommendation.
- Tutors must believe that the opinions they express in their reflections matter and that their comments are the basis for initiating changes in the program.
- Students must be encouraged to take on leadership roles assisting in the program.

Where do we go from here?

Undertaking this project with the Wernham West Research Institute allowed us to explore best practice in a peer-tutoring program and make changes based on action research. We continue to use our research tools of assessment such as reflections and peer-tutoring surveys, as we have found them invaluable in acknowledging student leadership and responding to student needs. The revised program is now moving in its fourth year and we are proud to say that it is flourishing with enrolment of tutors and tutees at an all-time high.

Presenting our research findings at an educational conference allowed us to meet and partner with a local public school, collaboratively planning their peer tutoring / leadership program. The lessons we learned helped them jump-start their program. This partnership allows us to demonstrate clearly that peer tutoring is a program any school can offer the student body at no cost. All it takes is a dedicated teacher to supervise the program and committed students to take on tutoring responsibilities and leadership roles.

EN BREF Une analyse documentaire de tutorat par les pairs démontre que ces programmes sont généralement évalués sur la base des améliorations académiques qu'ils favorisent chez les participants. Dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche-action au Collège Upper Canada, des chercheurs ont centré leur attention sur la satisfaction des tuteurs afin de juger de la qualité du programme. Ils se sont demandé si le jumelage du programme de tutorat à un rôle de leadership scolaire augmentait la satisfaction des tuteurs. Les changements apportés au programme ont mené à une plus grande satisfaction des participants. Surtout, ils ont donné lieu à des expériences positives qui ne pouvaient être mesurées empiriquement. Le programme a offert aux étudiants l'occasion de devenir des leaders en renforçant leurs compétences académiques et de vivre une expérience de croissance personnelle dérivée de l'impact positif procuré à d'autres. Le succès de ce programme a mené à des recommandations à l'intention d'autres écoles désirant améliorer leurs programmes de tutorat.

We have witnessed that the moral and social pay-offs for our tutors are perhaps even more important than their academic gains and make the time and effort worth every moment. Indeed, it is a step in the right direction for any high school trying to build a positive school community based on good citizenship. |

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