Striving for Best Practices in Peer Tutoring

In Autumn 2017, Vanier College's Learning Commons proudly published Learning to Peer Tutor: 25 Questions Novice Tutors Ask. *TASC's Ashley Rankin sat down with the author, Joshua Berman – also of TASC – to discuss key takeaways from the book.*

Ashley: When did you become passionate about peer tutoring?

Joshua: Growing up, I actually wanted to be a sports journalist. While studying media at Concordia University, I needed part-time work and became a peer tutor. It did not take very long for me to fall in love with helping my fellow classmates succeed. When I found out I could make an actual job of it, I quickly decided to change my career trajectory. That look a student gets when they learn something new still gives me a feeling unlike any other.

You recently published your first book; what led you to write *Learning to Peer Tutor*?

I know first-hand that tutoring comes with an array of challenges. I studied peer tutoring instructional strategies for my PERFORMA research under the supervision of Jock Mackay. Although I shared my findings at a few academic conferences, I had always envisioned creating a practical resource for tutors new to their role.

How did your understanding of best practices in peer tutoring change after completing your M.Ed.?

I always thought tutors needed a solid understanding of the material they were tutoring, and that the work required patience and empathy. However, there are some less obvious components necessary as well. Qualities such as active listening skills and enthusiasm for tutoring and learning are important. Knowledge of sound peer tutoring pedagogy that foster's tutee autonomy is essential.

What is tutoring pedagogy and why is it so important?

If a tutor were to do a tutee's work for them, the tutee would quickly learn that it was "okay" to come to the tutoring sessions unprepared or having attempted no challenging work beforehand. This mis-educative practice facilitates dependence and counters the purpose of peer tutoring. Tutoring pedagogy involves what the tutor can do to put the tutee at the centre of the tutoring to help the tutee become autonomous.

Is there anything a peer tutor can do to improve their practice?

Before novice tutors begin, they should be matched with an experienced peer tutor. Learning to Peer Tutor describes areas to focus on when observing your peer tutor. To improve, tutors should continually reflect upon their developing skills. In the book, I've included a tool with 13 elements to reflect upon at various points in the semester. Tutors can also improve by asking tutees for formative feedback during their sessions.

What are some common misconceptions about peer tutoring?

Students with an A+ in a course do not automatically make effective peer tutors. This sort of parallels the notion that a brilliant mathematician or musician is not necessarily going to be a successful math or music teacher. Further, a student with a solid understanding of course material, who is caring and has appropriate interpersonal skills, still needs an appreciation of pedagogical knowledge to set their tutee up for success.

What challenges do novice tutors face?

Novice tutors are inclined to showcase their knowledge rather than help the learner develop theirs. Many novice tutors assume that if they aren't talking, the tutee mustn't be learning. This approach forces the tutee to assume a more passive, observational role.

Does this relate to the term you use in your book, 'helicopter tutoring'?

Yes, absolutely.

Can you explain what you mean by 'helicopter tutoring'?

While completing my M.Ed., my wife and I had two children and would often hear of the dangers of 'helicopter parenting'. As we raise our boys, now aged four and six, we try to resist hovering, but your instincts are to protect your kids from anything negative. I think the same concept may apply to peer tutoring – novice tutors' instincts are to prevent tutees from making mistakes and to intervene before mistakes are made. Helicopter tutoring prevents errors in the short term, but it is precisely in a tutoring session where it can be useful to make mistakes. College students are more inclined to take a deep approach to learning when they can try, fail, get feedback, and try again before they are more formally assessed by a teacher.

What challenges did you have writing the book?

The main challenge was providing answers to the 25 questions that resonate with emerging adults. I strived to combine the theory I learned in my M.Ed. with teaching, tutoring and learning experiences to make the book as practical a resource as possible. To try to achieve this, I collaborated with 18 people, including teachers, academic advisors, specialists in the field of teaching, learning and pedagogy, and, perhaps most importantly, peer tutors. The six Vanier peer tutors I worked with over two summers helped formulate the questions and helped ensure that the answers would be meaningful for their peers. In this sense, I think the book is really a product of collaboration.

What do you hope novice tutors will get out of *Learning to Peer Tutor*?

Many of the strategies revolve around the idea that learning is doing and that learning is work. The tutor who sees their tutee not as an empty receptacle needing to be filled, but rather as an individual full of prior knowledge and experiences, will understand that their role is more to facilitate learning than simply to provide information.

That seems like good advice; could you briefly describe a few other strategies in your book?

One strategy involves proxemics. The work should ideally be in front of the tutee. Tutees will slowly and subtly push the work in front of their tutor, as if to say, "You can do it, why don't you just take over?" I advise tutors to clearly push the work back in front of the tutee to send the message that the ownership of the learning rests with the tutee. Another aspect of proxemics involves using physical space. While the tutee tries to apply what was covered, tutors should physically move back a few feet. This signals that it is now the tutee's turn to demonstrate understanding.

Another strategy involves praise. Rather than praising a tutee's natural ability or intelligence, the tutor should praise the tutee's stick-to-itiveness. Feedback prioritizing perseverance rather than natural intelligence helps tutees to adopt a mindset to not give up as course material becomes increasingly challenging.

Do you have any new projects on the horizon?

In 2016, TASC launched a tutor excellence award that I would like to expand. The award, nominated by tutees, is based upon eight specific criteria that embody an exceptional peer tutor. We've given out four awards so far; I think the award is a nice way to celebrate excellence in peer tutoring.

In the near future, I also plan to create a peer tutoring blog. I envision it as an online collective, a space for all peer tutors to ask questions and share ideas, struggles and strategies related to tutoring.

To anyone who still thinks that peer tutoring is just the blind leading the blind, what value is there in peer tutoring?

To be clear, peer tutoring is not at all a substitute for class time, and it can never replace students seeing teachers in office hours. However, I conclude the book suggesting that when tutors are able to relate to the challenges that tutees face, and when they provide a warm, non-threatening environment where the tutee is habitually active and is unafraid to make mistakes, there is indeed tremendous potential. Using sound pedagogy while collaborating, college students can help their peers engage in course material in deep and meaningful ways.

Over the past few years, I have been identifying some of the benefits and development opportunities for tutors themselves. In reflecting upon their tutoring experience, tutors have suggested that they've developed in four categories: 1) Academics, 2) Communication Skills, 3) Emotional Intelligence, and 4) Leadership Skills. I look forward to collaborating with my colleagues in TASC and throughout the College as we explore new ways of maximising the positive impact that peer tutoring can have on Vanier students.

Learning to Peer Tutor is currently available through the Vanier College Library. If you wish to comment on this article or discuss any aspect of peer tutoring with Ashley or Joshua, they can be reached at rankina@vanier.college and bermanj@vanier.college.

Ashley Rankin
is a Learning Specialist in the
Tutoring & Academic Success Centre.

Joshua Berman
is a Learning Specialist in the
Tutoring & Academic Success Centre.