

Tutoring: Collaborative Approaches to Assisted Reading

Dr Gary Woolley

Lecturer, School of Education and Professional Studies

Griffith University

Bernard Pryor, NLNW Project Officer: Gary, we're here today to discuss your research into collaborative approaches to tutoring. Can you tell us exactly what is meant by 'tutoring'?

Gary Woolley: Well, 'tutoring' is a type of interaction or collaboration between a tutor and tutee, usually around some area of the curriculum that needs developing or strengthening.

Bernard: Is collaboration ever seen as negative?

Gary: No, certainly not. Collaboration is when two people are working together on shared understandings. It's often used in situations where we see the two people as being on a sort of type of equal footing. One of them may be in an instructional role but the end result is that we would see them as coming together; developing. The tutee and the tutor will become more like one another.

Bernard: Are there different types of tutoring?

Gary: Yes, there are a number of different types of tutoring. Firstly, you have teacher—child tutoring, where you have the expert and the novice. You have other situations where you might have a parent tutoring their child, or you might have an older sibling or more expert sibling tutoring their brother or sister. Other situations may be where you have a volunteer tutor or teacher aide tutoring a child in the school situation. Or you might have other situations like peer tutoring, where you have cross-age tutoring, which is older child working with a younger child. You might have a situation where you have same-age peer tutoring, where two children from the same class or grade are working with one another for a shared purpose. You might have a situation where you have one child is more expert than the other, so one child helping the other. Or you might have a situation where both are on equal terms, helping one another. You might also have a situation where you have like a cross-age tutoring with a poorer reader in a later grade helping a younger reader.

Bernard: What should a tutoring program entail?

Gary: Trained tutors are much better than untrained tutors. There needs to be a fairly structured program for tutors to follow. A training program needs to be fairly rigorous and needs to be able to develop shared understandings, something that is consistent with the curriculum of the school and school approaches. And also regular supervision and consultation with a reading expert, such as a support teacher or a specialist reading teacher.

Bernard: How can a school facilitate tutoring?

Gary: When we're talking about a school situation, tutors need to feel valued; they need to feel accepted; part of the staff in the school. It's very important that they have somewhere to meet; somewhere to share their experiences and maybe somewhere where they can have a cup of coffee; somewhere to put their things. They need to be able to have a contact person in the school, someone that they can reflect with, that they can get feedback from.

Bernard: What does research tell us about effective tutoring practices?

Gary: What children need is a lot of choice of interesting materials – interesting books; where tutors naturally focus on meaning rather than decoding, not necessarily word accuracy; and when miscues or errors are seen as learning experiences rather than something that the child has done wrong. This creates a safe environment for the child to experiment and this is what it's all about. The tutoring situation should be about the child exploring and developing. If the focus is on reading for pleasure, there are much more beneficial gains. It also provides a situation where they can maintain attention. And one of the benefits of tutoring is that it can provide instant and positive feedback to the tutee and develop that particular relationship between the tutor and the tutee that is all important.

Bernard: Earlier you mentioned peer tutoring. Can you tell us more?

Gary: I'll just allude to a project that we're working on at the moment. I'm working on a project called 'Reading Partnerships' with Independent Schools, Queensland. And within this program, or Reading Partnerships, we have situations where the children go into pairs in a peer-tutoring situation. In this situation we've used a number of techniques that were developed by New South Wales Department of Education and Training. One is the 'clicks and clunks' method of supporting a reader. The other method that we're using is the 'question stems'. Basically, we design a cue card that is given to one of the students to ask questions about a particular story that they're reading. The questions are designed to start from easier to much more complex, so a particular card might have questions at the knowledge level. So one student asks the other student questions and what can be more empowering than asking questions?

Bernard: You said that trained tutors are better than untrained tutors. Can you tell us more about this important aspect?

Gary: Well, there have been a number of research studies that have shown that where parents or tutors have not been trained in ways to interact with the tutee, the situation can develop into frustration and anger for both the tutor and the tutee. The main thing is that tutors have a consistent and well-constructed framework to work within. Now one of the best frameworks is the 'Pause, Prompt, Praise' methodology. This has been tried out in many different areas and found very effective. I tend to

think of it as 'Pause, Prompt and Reflective Feedback'. We should look at the tutoring situation as having three parts: a before reading, a during reading and after reading. Reading needs to be connected with a child's own experiences of the world. So what needs to happen before reading is that the tutor needs to be able to do a lot of talking with the child, maybe even read the story beforehand in some situations, particularly if the child isn't very confident, to reflect on the child's own experiences in relation to the story. Now the 'during reading', as I mentioned earlier on, the 'pause, prompt, praise' is probably one of the most effective ways of helping children. But also one of the other things to develop comprehension is getting children to visualise as they're going through, or connecting with the pictures, particularly for the younger children. One of the most effective ways to help children, particularly with comprehension, is getting children to retell. It's very important that the tutoring situation encourages readers to become self-supporting. And there are three principles which I usually follow in relation to developing self-regulation in learners. Well, the first principle is about relationship: developing relationship and a sense of relatedness; relationship between the tutor and the tutee to such a degree where the tutee can feel like they can take risks in a safe environment. Relatedness should also develop a sense of shared responsibility; partnership. And also the tutor should be able to help the child connect with the story or the passage that they're reading as well. 'Does that sound right? Does that make sense?' You're asking the child. You're expecting the child to work out that for themselves. This is a very positive support.

Bernard: What is the second principle?

Gary: The second principle is developing a sense of competence. Feedback is important to give the child a way of reflecting on the sufficiency of their responses – appropriate performance feedback rather than praise. Praise can seem like being condescending or meaningless if it's not related to actual performance. One of the most important aspects of developing competence is modelling. In many situations the tutor needs to explicitly model the type of responses that they are expecting from the child – when the child is given a number of skills and they are able to choose which skill that they are able to use in particular situations.

Bernard: And what is the third principle?

Gary: The third aspect is developing autonomy. As learners, we need to develop the ability to be able to learn by ourselves in different situations. And basically that's what tutoring is all about. The tutoring is about transfer of responsibility from the tutor to the tutee. The tutee will be expected to take over the major role and become much more independent and self-regulating. Well, how do we develop self-regulation? And how do we develop a sense of independence in the child? Well, I think that it relates to three aspects. One is: the student needs to be encouraged to set a goal, to set a reading goal, to reflect on where they were before, such as, 'When I have difficulties, when I reach a situation where there is a word that I don't know, maybe I need to read back or read forward.' The child needs to monitor that goal; to be encouraged to

read for meaning. When a child is showing that they are self-correcting, then we know that they are monitoring; they are self-monitoring. And the child needs to reflect on their performance. The tutor should keep in mind that whenever they give feedback they're encouraging self-regulation, encouraging independent reading. Getting the child to reflect on the strategies that they've used: Was it effective to read ahead, to read back, how did that work? And that's important. There's another important point to make about developing autonomy, developing self-regulated learners: and this is about developing engagement. Typically, children who have learning difficulties in particular become unresponsive and develop a sense of learned helplessness; they disengage. They disengage for a number of reasons. One is, that they may disengage because to not engage with the material might be a way of preserving their self-esteem. If they don't try, and fail, they can say, 'I failed because I didn't try'. So engagement is very important and one of the great benefits of a tutoring situation is that the tutor can help the child engage with the reading material. Engagement is very important if we look at the process just as much as the product. When we read, we just don't read to get the meaning or we don't just read to get the answer to a question, we're also focusing on the process. And the process is: How do we get to meaning? And this is one of the things that the tutor should be always concentrating on or focusing on is: How is the child getting to meaning? Is the child using appropriate strategies? Are we getting the child to reflect or use metacognitive understanding, in other words, to reflect upon the process of reading? And one way to do that is to focus on meaning. Another thing we need to focus on is language. Reading is a language skill and we need to develop that language. The talk between the tutor and the tutee needs to be very rich and develop understandings about words and about ideas presented in the materials.