Tutors: Tutoring Strategies and Organizing Learning

Jill Castek
Portland State University, jcastek@email.arizona.edu

Gloria Jacobs
Portland State University, gljacobs@pdx.edu

Kimberly D. Pendell
Portland State University, kpendell@pdx.edu

Drew Pizzolato
Portland State University

Stephen Reder
Portland State University, reders@pdx.edu

Elizabeth Melissa Withers
Portland State University

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Tutoring Strategies and Organizing Learning

Digital Literacy Acquisition in Brief:
What Research Tells Us about Tutors

Overview

These findings are from an Institute of Museum and Library Services funded research project that interviewed more than 100 participants within a multi-state Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA) project. The BTOP project included six lead partners who developed local networks of community organizations to provide adults with an opportunity to learn to use computers and the Internet.

While these networks created a variety of implementation strategies and ways to serve learners' needs, they shared these key features:

- curriculum on the Learner Web, an online platform designed specifically for adult learners, which included digital literacy material in English and Spanish
- in-person tutor support
- the opportunity to work at their own pace and identify their own goals

Tutors and lab coordinators developed a set of strategies they used for responding to learner needs and for organizing learning. These included tools, protocols, and a set of behaviors that shaped the tutor-facilitated aspects of the digital literacy acquisition process.

- A personal yet standardized approach for running tutoring sessions was used. This included a way to get the new learners or a new group started and then differentiating support as the learners worked at their own pace. These approaches could be unique to the tutor or could be part of a more standardized approach used within the lab.

- The predictable structure of the program, and the sequenced online materials, provided tutors a base curriculum upon which to develop their own personalized tutoring approaches, which varied across individuals based on need.

- Routines were developed for returning to learners in a group setting in order to follow-up after having provided support. Although each tutor model was different, the tutors indicated that they had a method for connecting with learners throughout a session. Some tutors sat in the center or periphery of the room and scanned learner actions. Others circled about the room, and others watched for learners to signal that they wanted help.

- Clear learner expectations were set. Some learners came in with minimal experience or poor experiences in educational settings. One tutor talked about how a learner did not know how to self-advocate. As such, tutors may need to teach learners how to function within a classroom and how to ask for help in ways that allow them to take charge of their own learning.

- Tutors become skilled in figuring out what learners needed. Although tutors tended not to consciously engage in formative, ongoing assessment, they appeared to use their intuition, along with the learners’ ongoing interactions with Learner Web, and the learners’ requests for help to provide support when needed. They were also skilled at knowing when to hold back to provide space for the development of independence.

“Whenever they come in... I usually like them to start with typing lessons. I open up the typing page... We go on doing either 10 minutes, 15, or 30 on the typing. And then we say ok guys get ready, we’re going to work on [a new] lesson now.... But as they progress, our goal is for them to be able to get on by themselves.”

~Tutor
Tutoring strategies and procedures for organizing learning help tutors know when and how to help learners at key moments. Every learner is different, and every community is different, so tutors developed strategies and procedures that were specifically geared toward meeting the needs of specific groups of learners. For example, one lab coordinator gave each learner a notebook for taking notes while learning, but kept the notebooks at the lab. She believed that if she let the notebooks go home, the students wouldn’t bring them back.

Another tutor explained how she watched to see if learners spend too much time on one screen. Because she knew about how long the activity on each screen should take, and because she knew some learners wouldn’t ask for help even when stuck, her observations told her when to approach the learner to check whether help was needed. She then offered help based on what she knew about the learner and where the learner was with regard to skill development within the online digital literacy learning materials.

Key Discoveries

- Tutors presented information in a variety of ways that were respectful of the learners’ needs. For instance, one tutor described how she provided help to one learner who seemed intimidated or hesitated to ask for help. She responded to this learner’s needs by asking the person sitting next to the struggling learner to tell her, step by step, how he completed the task. This allowed the struggling learner to “eavesdrop” and learn without having to directly ask for help.

- Tutors encouraged practice and let learners know that repetition is ok and even desirable. Tutors let learners know that it’s not expected that they “get it” the first time.

- Tutors modeled learning behaviors. Successful tutors were honest with the learners when they didn’t know the answer to something or when the computer did not react the way it was expected too. The learners appeared to appreciate when tutors demonstrated their fallibility and signaled that they were learning too. This allowed tutors to model learning behaviors such as experimentation.

- Tutors adjusted persona. Successful tutors were able to use the “roles” learners often applied to them to the advantage of the learner. For instance, some older female tutors were able to play on their roles of “mothers” to support younger learners. However, this role wouldn’t work with women of their own age. They needed to adjust their tutor persona according to who the learner was.
What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

How we organize our learning depends on the tutors we have available. I have learned that there is a real distinction between a good individual tutor and a good group tutor. Not all tutors know how to juggle the varied needs of a small group. In our lab we have multiple volunteers working on some days when we don’t have a group tutor. The group tutor is able to ascertain the message in the silence. When working with one student s/he knows that another is waiting or needing help. The good individual tutor can focus and engage with one student, but not necessarily pick up the cue of silence coming from a student across the lab.

~ Program Administrator

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More information about the project, research findings, publications, and project data can be found in PDX Scholar at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/digital_literacy_acquisition/

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