Tutors: Personal Qualities of Tutors

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**Recommended Citation**

Personal Qualities of Tutors

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**
Personal Qualities of Tutors

Key Discoveries

Although learners said they appreciated the technical knowledge of tutors, learners and tutors shared that the most important quality associated with a successful tutor was patience. In addition to patience, the data indicated other qualities effective tutors possess include:

- **Observant**: Successful tutors balanced what the learners thought they needed and wanted with what the tutors knew the learners needed based on their experience with previous learners, their knowledge the structured online materials, and all other program requirements. Attention to the learners’ perceptions of their needs was important for building trust and linking known and new information. Using that as a basis, tutors used the funds of knowledge learners brought with them from their everyday experiences and put them to use to learn digital literacy skills.

- **Respectful**: Effective tutors allowed the learners to maintain control over the computer and offered help in ways that were not intimidating to the learner. This included actions such as not taking control of the mouse or demonstrating something too quickly. They broke actions down into smaller steps that learners could follow with decreasing amounts of guidance as their skill level and independence grew.

- **Responsive**: Tutors developed ways to work with learners who “don’t know what they don’t know.” Some learners may have been difficult to help because they knew they needed help but may not have known what they wanted to learn, or how to ask for help. Others may not have known what could be an effective learning process for them.

Voices from the Field

Lab coordinators, other tutors, and learners all expressed that tutor personality was more important than a tutor’s technical skills. Lab coordinators placed tutors into positions according those personal strengths. As one lab coordinator said:

“We're blessed to have a few tutors that are natural teachers, they can get up in front of a classroom and start leading as though they have their teaching credentials and they don't. They're just fabulous. They're innate teachers. It's so exciting to have tutors like that. And that's where I put them, into more classroom like settings, where they can do some group discussion, some group activities.”

~ Lab Coordinator
While it is important for tutors to have computer skills, it's more important for them to be good at tutoring. A lab coordinator told us that communication skills, and listening skills in particular, are important. Many learners and tutors referred to the ability of a tutor to listen and communicate as patience, and others called it respect. Regardless of what label was applied, it was the ability of the tutors to connect with learners that made the difference:

“You really have to be able to talk with people. Look them in the eye, listen. Along with communication--it isn’t just talking, it’s the listening. There are people out there that can do a lot of talking, but they don’t know how to listen. So the communication skills are first and foremost. Second, they better know how to use a computer.”

~ Lab Coordinator

**Key Discoveries**

- **Persistent**: Tutors developed ways to work with learners who were disinterested in learning digital literacy skills because they felt a greater need to find employment. In other cases, some learners were resistant because of past negative experiences with education, or because of perceived differences between them and the tutor. Tutors worked to overcome resistance by persistently making the content relevant while being respectful of learners’ personal histories.

- **Creative**: Tutors developed novel approaches to building relevance for learners and teaching concepts. For example, a tutor might send a learner an email and then prompted them to check their inbox. Or, a tutor might “wow” new learners by showing them Google Earth or a “Street View” of their childhood home.
What Do These Findings Mean For Your Work?

In our program we get so many different types of personalities walking through our door, each wanting to volunteer. Not every volunteer is equipped to be a tutor. When we meet someone who appears to be a good communicator, interested and engaged with others, and of a fairly calm disposition, we are more inclined to put them on our Volunteer Tutor track. Others come in, and after interviews we find other duties to the support the program rather than direct work with a student.

We met tutors who didn’t even know they would like to teach. Some even switched their careers toward teaching. On the other hand, we had some well meaning tutors that really never clicked with students. They didn’t have enough computer experience and weren’t able to assist, or they didn’t respond to the learner’s needs or listen well. They often self-selected themselves out by not returning after a few weeks.

~ Program Director

Acknowledgements & Further Information

These research efforts were informed and supported by a National Advisory Committee and a Research Applications Committee made up of professionals who support adult learners.

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/

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership Grant # LG-06-11-0340-11.