Peer Tutoring
Do’s and Don’ts

Kathryne H. Pugh
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by
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Many teachers remember taking a class in school or college in which they struggled until someone, perhaps a classmate or a graduate student, stepped in to help. This person might have shown them how to read for key information or how to solve a particular type of equation. The information, whatever it was, was tailored to a need at that moment and conveyed face to face.

That was peer tutoring — spontaneous, unstructured, and serendipitous. A lucky break!

But students don't have to hope for a lucky break. The same kind of assistance can be planned and encouraged in the classroom, whether elementary, middle, or high school or college. Peer tutoring that is structured and intentional can be the boost that students need to overcome difficulties. And it can be effective at every grade.

Peer tutoring (or PT), as teachers who have used it effectively in their classrooms will attest, is a powerful strategy for augmenting teacher-delivered instruction. For some students, hearing a classmate say virtually
the same thing that the teacher has said just seems to make the information shine clear.

Tutees (those who are tutored) are not the only beneficiaries of peer tutoring. Student tutors themselves often gain a better understanding of the subject matter as they explain it to another student. And the responsibility of being a peer tutor can be empowering.

Following are two comments from teachers who have used peer tutoring:

"One student I had was having so much trouble doing his multiplication tables in class learned them almost immediately when his tutor [an older student] helped him."

"When our counselor asked me if one of my students could be a tutor, I said, 'Of course. Any time that this girl is someplace other than my class, everything is better.' But surprisingly (to me, anyway) she made a real good tutor. She wants to be one next year, too."

A former tutor made the following comment: "When I was in the second grade, a fifth-grader was my tutor. I couldn't read, and I learned how to do it. When I became a fifth-grader, I wanted to help a second-grader to learn how to read."

In an era of No Child Left Behind and increased standardized testing, many teachers see anything not directly related to NCLB and testing as a dispensable add-on. Peer tutoring gets lumped into this "extra" category. But, in fact, peer tutoring is an indispensable instructional strategy for success in delivering today's
overcrowded curriculum. Teachers — and students — need all the help they can get, and peer tutoring is a way to deliver it. Teachers gain by having to do less reteaching. Students gain from the tutor-tutee interaction, both in mastering content and in developing social and learning skills.

Often when one student helps another to become skilled at a subject or to learn to how to take tests, the result is higher self-esteem and greater ability for both students. If a learner feels confident, he or she no longer fears the subject or the test and so will perform better.

Most psychologists would agree that the best teachers look after the holistic needs of their students. That is, they view their students as individuals with social and emotional, as well as intellectual, needs and interests. When class loads and school/system/state requirements dominate so much of what happens in the classroom, it is easy for teachers get caught up in a less than holistic view — to see their students as only a group, a mass. Peer tutoring, as a strategy in the teacher’s instructional arsenal, can help the teacher refocus beyond the workload.

The bottom line is that a peer tutor, working with one student at a time, can do much that the teacher cannot.

For example, looking toward future testing, peer tutors can help their tutees understand the standards by which their learning will be measured. The tutors can help reinforce classroom learning leading up to the test. For instance, with reference to written assessments, tutors can help tutees understand the distinction between a
writing “prompt” and a writing “assignment.” They can give examples of both and demonstrate how each can be addressed successfully. Then they can explain how a writing sample might be scored by explaining a rubric. All of this underscores teachers’ work in the classroom and serves to reinforce students’ classroom and homework efforts.

Peer tutoring should not be drudgery for either the tutor or the tutee. A typical peer tutoring program also needs room for fun. Tutors can use academic games that promote learning, for example. Flexibility in instruction is essential. After all, every student has a preferred learning style, and it will be up to the peer tutor — with the teacher’s assistance — to learn about the tutee’s learning style and try to tutor by using that style.

All of this may sound a little daunting to the busy teacher. The purpose of this fastback is to make peer tutoring understandable in a nutshell and to show that most teachers can implement effective peer tutoring through some basic understandings and by following some simple do’s and don’ts.
Peer Tutoring Defined

The main difference between teaching and tutoring is focus. Teachers must teach an entire curriculum to an entire class. Tutors focus on specific areas of learning, the problem areas experienced by their tutees. Tutoring complements and supplements classroom teaching, reaching the struggling student in ways that classroom teaching cannot. This is especially helpful for consistently academically unsuccessful or challenged students. Such students often say (and sometimes mean it) that they don’t “like” their teacher and that they “can’t learn.” A peer tutor, whether the same age or somewhat older, should be seen more as a friend than an authority figure. The tutor can have an edge by being “liked” and encouraging a “can do” attitude.

Thus the first thing a tutor must do is establish a friendship with the tutee. This is something most teachers cannot and should not do because there will always be a friend/authority figure conflict. On the other hand, peers (whether age-mates or not) should be friends. Peer tutors are usually the schoolmates, if not the classmates, of their tutees. And so friendship is a natural and productive starting point for the peer tu-
toring relationship. Indeed, if a friendship cannot be established, then the peer tutoring pairing likely will not be successful.

At the same time, tutoring time cannot be seen by the tutee (or the tutor) merely as "have fun and talk" time. The shared experience of tutoring has a focus: to assist the tutee to be a successful learner. It must be couched as friend helping friend in order for a productive peer tutoring bond to be created. But it must retain a learning focus.

The initial do's for the teacher are straightforward:

- **Do** make sure that tutors understand that friendship with the tutee is an important basis for learning success.
- **Do** define a focus so that tutors and tutees understand what they should be working on together.
An effective peer tutoring program can involve quite a few people, especially if it operates across grade levels or schoolwide. Some programs involve multiple schools. The elements described in this fast-back are based on the assumption that the peer tutoring program will include multiple classrooms. These elements can be modified as needed, depending on the number of classrooms, the size of the school or schools, and the ages and grades of the students.

The PT Facilitator and the Scope of the Program

Someone — a teacher usually, or a guidance counselor or even a parent volunteer — will need to serve as the peer tutoring facilitator. Assuming that the peer tutoring program will operate beyond a single classroom, the choice of a PT facilitator (or team of facilitators) should be based on a consensus of the teaching
staff and with support from administrators. These are the primary stakeholders.

One or more peer tutoring facilitators will need to be "in charge." The PT facilitator is the decision-maker. He or she (or they) should be able to speak authoritatively about the value of the program to teachers, administrators, support personnel, and parents. Such involvement stimulates feelings of "ownership" and helps to facilitate the mustering of academic and social resources that will ensure a successful program.

Several members of the faculty need to be involved in the peer tutoring program from the start, even if the program is planned to operate in only a couple of classrooms at first. The principal should know what is going on, and so should the school counselor and other resource persons, such as the media specialist, who may be called on for help. They all need to know how the program is going to work. As the effort involves more tutors and tutees across classrooms, grades, or even schools, then more individuals will need to be involved, at least at the informational level.

The PT facilitator will be charged with developing the program: articulating its scope, recruiting and training tutors, designating tutees, setting objectives, scheduling tutoring times and places, and directing the evaluation of the PT program. But for the program to be successful, there also must be a support group to act as an advisory council. These individuals also are stakeholders. This group should include members of the community, as well as educators, and will help determine the scope and sequence of the program.
Here are three more do’s to get started:

- **Do** involve all of the stakeholders to develop feelings of ownership and to ensure cooperation.
- **Do** plan carefully and thoroughly before launching the program. Think through the “what if’s.”
- **Do** keep stakeholders informed about the program’s successes and seek their advice in meeting challenges and solving problems.

At the very first meeting of the active participants and the support group, the PT facilitator should introduce everyone and discuss the program’s goals and the various roles that each individual will play, from identifying tutors and tutees to asking local businesses to provide resources or funding. At later meetings, after the PT program has operated for a while, the stakeholders will be interested in seeing students’ journals, poems, reflections, and pre- and post-test results. They will be eager to discuss problems and solutions, and they can contribute meaningfully as plans develop to expand the program.

**Establishing Program Objectives and a Budget**

The PT facilitator ultimately will manage, though may not initially determine, the peer tutoring budget and the allocation of funds. (The budgetary allocation may be set by the administration or, in the case of large-scale programs, by the school board.) The PT facilitator will review, or coordinate the review of, the
program's successes and failures in order to plan for improvement and continuation of the program from semester to semester and from year to year. The program, its budget, and its evaluation will be guided by clear objectives.

No peer tutoring program can succeed that tries to be all things to all students (or all teachers or all parents, for that matter). Therefore, a key to success will be determining a clear focus for the program. And starting small, say, with eight to 10 tutees and an equal number of tutors, makes good sense. What can the program do and, just as important, what should it not attempt to do? Following are several examples of measurable program objectives:

- At least 60% of the tutees in the PT program will improve by at least a letter grade by the end of the semester (quarter, trimester, year).
- At least 60% of the tutees will increase their end-of-year test scores by a minimum of 10 points.
- At least 60% of the tutees previously recommended for retention will pass to the next grade level.
- At least 60% of the tutees will report a high level of satisfaction with the tutoring experience.
- At least 60% of the tutors will indicate willingness to continue in the PT program.

There is nothing sacred about the 60% figure. Maybe 40% is more reasonable, or 80%. The nature of the program and the challenges presented by the tutees and the subject matter should guide the setting of program objectives.
Note that anecdotal reporting is valuable; the last two items require it. Asking tutors and tutees to reflect on their experiences is a way to answer qualitative objectives with regard to perceived program success. Observations by teachers, administrators, and even parents also can be valuable to determine how well the program has done and how it might be made more effective in the future.

Once the objectives of the peer tutoring program have been established, potential tutors and tutees can be identified. Teachers are in the best position to determine which students need and are likely to benefit from the peer tutoring interaction. Sometimes this determination is made in consultation with the school guidance counselor or students' parents. It is not unusual for more students to be identified than can be served initially by the PT program. A waiting list can be created—both for those students who need tutoring and for those who desire to be tutors.

One way to serve as many students as possible is by identifying target learning goals. I'll say more about this later. In brief, the more specific these are, the more tailored can be the tutoring effort. Once the tutee achieves the goal, he or she can be "rotated out" so that another student can be helped. Peer tutoring usually should not be intended as going indefinitely, though there may be good reasons in some cases for establishing a longer term relationship between tutor and tutee. A great deal of good can be achieved by short-term tutor/tutee relationships, which may or may not be revisited during the school year.
Finally, how can the program be most effective within the financial constraints that are set? Most PT programs can be successful without much funding, but it is helpful to know what money is needed and how it will be spent. This will become more important if funds are needed to pay staffing costs, such as for paid supervision before or after school. But even an all-volunteer program likely will incur some costs for supplies, from basic pencils, pens, and paper to reward certificates and award tokens.

The do's for getting started might be stated as follows:

- Do decide what problems to tackle by using peer tutoring. Hold to a few key issues, set reasonable learning goals, and decide how to measure success.

- Do start small, say, with eight to 10 tutors and an equal number of tutees. Once this number becomes manageable, then the program can grow.

- Do allocate resources — time, space, money, materials — adequate to the size and objectives of the peer tutoring program.

Here's the corollary to the last point:

- Don't enlarge the program unless or until the resources are present to do so. Otherwise, the entire effort likely will collapse of its own weight.
Identifying and Matching Tutors and Tutees

While finding students in need of tutoring assistance may be all too easy, finding good tutors may be more challenging.

It should be kept in mind that tutors often gain as much from a peer tutoring program as do the tutees. Even though it may be tempting to select the brightest children for this task, sometimes the very best tutors are not the very best students. For example, a fifth-grader who is reading at the third-grade level can tutor a kindergartner or a first-grader in reading and still seem quite advanced compared to the student being tutored. An eighth-grader who is doing basic eighth-grade work can tutor a younger student, perhaps a sixth-grader in the same school in basic sixth-grade work. A high school senior without desire or qualifications to go to college can work with a sophomore student who is struggling to pass required high school subjects. The most important thing to remember when making such a choice is that the youngsters who are chosen to be tutors must care about their classmates. A fifth-grader who reads must really want a first-grade tutee to be a reader.

The advantage of choosing a tutor who may be struggling in his or her own grade to tutor a younger student is that the act of tutoring can be empowering. Not only does working with the younger student build self-esteem and self-confidence, it can reinforce basic skills and give the tutor a boost toward higher competence in his or her own grade-level work.
Most beginning programs should start with eight to 10 tutors and then increase the number of tutors as the program becomes successful and needs to grow. The most effective starting point is to think of the tutor-to-tutee ratio being one-on-one. Later on, some tutors may be able to help more than one tutee. But keeping things simple in the beginning will set a firmer foundation than will trying to be too ambitious.

In many schools, some form of intra-classroom peer tutoring already exists. Many teachers routinely ask some students to help other students within their classrooms. This informal peer tutoring can provide a foundation for a more extensive, more formalized, cross-classroom or cross-school PT program.

To summarize, here are a couple of do's:

- Do limit the number of tutors chosen to get a PT program started. Later the program can grow from a firm foundation.
- Do choose students as tutors because they have skills to teach and the desire to work as a tutor, even though they may be struggling academically themselves.

Potential tutees often need more than academic assistance. A major issue in peer tutoring is developing self-esteem. In an effective PT program, both tutors and tutees will increase their sense of responsibility, self-esteem, and self-reliance. In fact, some PT programs state this as a formal objective and then use pre- and post-self-esteem inventories to assess the program's efficacy in this area.
Tutees often are sad, troubled, and poorly disciplined. Limited successes in school lead to other problems, such as social stigmatization ("getting a bad name") and inappropriate behavior ("acting out"). These characteristics should signal that the student might benefit from the one-on-one bonding with another student who is focused on helping the tutee succeed. Tutees often are students who need more than an academic mentor; they need someone who will act as a "big brother" or "big sister." Or they need someone who simply will be a nonjudgmental friend.

Here are another pair of do's:

- **Do** look for tutees who are acting out or are withdrawn in addition to experiencing academic difficulties.
- **Do** view the peer tutoring program as an opportunity to build students' self-esteem, not just to remediate skills.

Matching tutors and tutees on the basis of skills possessed (tutor) and skills needed (tutee) is a starting point. Key questions for tutors include: How did you (the tutor) learn the skill? How might you teach the skill to someone else? Are there alternative ways to teach and learn the skill? The PT facilitator needs to plan for at least a minimal amount of tutor training before turning the tutor loose to work one-on-one with the tutee.

Tutors need to learn how to listen to their tutees — and vice versa. If the tutee isn't receptive, the PT pro-
gram won’t work either. The student being tutored should look up to and want to be like the tutor. This is where a sense of friendship and mutual respect is important. Consider this example: A young student was doing poorly in math. He was tutored by another student, slightly older, who did well in math. But the younger student saw his tutor as a “nerd,” whom he didn’t respect. And so the tutee didn’t learn in spite of his tutor’s best attempts.

The lesson for the PT facilitator is that students should not be placed in a tutoring relationship if they express a dislike for their tutor or tutee. Both students should be given the opportunity to say what and who would make them feel most comfortable in order to set effective conditions for learning.

Following are the do’s and don’ts:

- **Do** match tutors and tutees on the basis of more than skills. Think about personalities, too.
- **Don’t** disregard personal preferences and assume that differences will simply disappear over time.

**Scheduling Times and Places for Tutoring**

Finding a regular time for peer tutoring can be a challenge, but it is important for the stability of the program. Scheduling tutoring at regular times and in consistent locations is an important program operational goal and will enhance student learning.

Elementary schools will need to be creative in finding time to schedule peer tutoring; but, because schedules at the elementary level usually are more flexible than
those in middle and high schools, it often is easier to accommodate the PT program. In middle and high schools, students sometimes have a study hall or independent study time that can be designated for peer tutoring. In other cases, the tutoring time can be set aside during homeroom (or home base), an advisory period, or an extracurricular period. Schools that use a rotation system for electives and enrichment often can incorporate the PT program into the rotation.

Many schools offer before- and after-school programs. These can be other options for scheduling the PT program. Whenever peer tutoring is scheduled, it must accommodate the needs of both the tutor and the tutee, both of whom may be involved in other programs as well.

Another challenging aspect of scheduling the PT program is scheduling supervision. Supervision is not simply controlling behavior; teachers assist tutors and supervise their activities. Before- or after-school supervisory work often must be staffed by persons working outside the normal workday and thus at extra pay, a factor to be considered when building the PT program budget. On the other hand, parent volunteers may be called on to supervise, which can help hold down program costs. To some extent, whether supervisors are paid or not will depend on local contractual agreements, and liability issues also need to be taken into account.

How much time should be scheduled for a peer tutoring session? As a general rule, at least 30 minutes should be set aside for the tutor and the tutee to work one on
one. Older students can benefit from longer sessions, up to one hour. The schedule should be compatible with the attention spans of the students involved.

Finding the best setting for tutoring can be as challenging as setting a successful schedule. Sometimes the best choice is in the classroom while other students are working on other assignments. Although tutors and tutees may have to compete with classroom conversation, teacher instruction, and general noise to hear one another, the setting is easy to arrange because a couple of desks pushed together may be sufficient. Such a setting often works well in the elementary classroom, and it answers the question of supervision because the teacher is present. It can work in middle and high schools but may not be seen as advantageous, especially in highly structured classrooms.

Tutoring in the corridor is another option, but some students view working in the hallway as negative and associate it with punishment. Also, the light may not be as good as in the classroom, passing students may be a distraction, and during winter months school corridors may be cold. Supervision may be sporadic or unavailable, depending on whether the teacher has time to step out of the classroom now and then.

With assigned or volunteer supervision, a separate, otherwise unused classroom could be ideal, allowing for several tutor-tutee pairs to be working simultaneously in the same setting. If a classroom is not available, perhaps there is a little-used conference room in the guidance or administrative area.
In summary, the do's and don’ts might be stated as follows:

- **Do** find a *regular* time for the PT program to operate.
- **Do** take into account the scheduling needs of both tutors and tutees.
- **Do** find a setting that can be used regularly and that provides adequate space, good light, and reasonably controlled noise.
- **Do** provide for attentive supervision, whether paid or voluntary.
- **Don’t** forget to consider tutor and tutee attention spans when scheduling one-on-one tutoring sessions.

**Setting Learning Goals and Rewarding Achievement**

Good tutor-tutee relationships are vital to success, both for individual tutee achievement and for the success of the PT program. Building a friendship is the first step — and a very special step. It will work a little differently for each pair, whether age-mates or younger elementary student with older elementary student, elementary student with middle-schooler, or middle-schooler with high-schooler. The dynamics of childhood and adolescence come into play, and no real tutoring is possible outside the framework of at least a basic level of friendship. Often tutor-tutee relationships develop more strongly and are sustained over time. Some tutees come to see their tutors as older brothers or sisters.
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As friendship grows, more challenging learning goals become possible. Tutors come to know more about the instructional needs of their tutees, and tutees are willing to be more self-revealing about their shortcomings. One part of tutor training will be to help tutors become good observers and listeners so that they can better discern what they can do to help their tutees learn most effectively. The PT facilitator should work with tutors so that they can find out what learning styles their tutees prefer: visual, oral, kinesthetic, and so on. A learning styles inventory can be useful. Then the PT facilitator can help the tutors adapt their tutoring to their tutee’s preferred style.

Tutors and tutees should work together to set learning goals. For example, let’s say that Linda, a seventh-grade tutor, begins to work with her fifth-grade tutee, Jeanette, and notices that Jeanette has trouble seeing a difference between one-half and one-fourth. Together, the two girls can decide that they should focus on fractions, and so Linda can proceed to show Jeannette a number of ways to learn about fractions. Then they can practice together until Jeannette can confidently handle the fraction problems in her math book.

Another practice that tutors need to learn is how to reward their tutees appropriately for achieving the learning goals. The PT facilitator can provide award certificates, stickers, small prizes, or other tokens — in addition to encouraging tutors to use positive praise, which, coming from an older peer, often is the best reward of all.

Likewise, the PT facilitator needs to develop a praise
and reward system for the tutors who are volunteering their time and talents. Certificates of appreciation, gift books, "Super Tutor" trophies, a year-end pizza party — all are ideas worth considering. The praise should be personal, and the rewards should fit the age and grade of the tutors.

The PT facilitator also needs to be certain to recognize any adult volunteers for their contributions to the program, whether they are other teachers, administrators, parents, or community volunteers and whether the contributions are time and talent or money and materials. A thank-you note will always be appreciated, but a social gathering (and program debriefing) at the end of the year can be even better.

Here again are the do’s and don’ts:

- Do encourage tutors and tutees to become friends.
- Do help tutors understand about learning styles and become good observers and listeners.
- Do help tutors and tutees set reachable learning goals.
- Do suggest ways that tutors can celebrate tutees’ successes.
- Don’t forget to show tutors and other volunteers that their work is appreciated.

Evaluating the PT Program and Planning for Continuation

Using the goals established at the start of the program, the PT facilitator should take the lead in evaluating the program. Did the program measure up?
What were the outstanding successes? What were the shortcomings? The answers to these questions will shape plans to improve, continue, and possibly expand the PT program.

The evaluation process also should be a vehicle for renewal. Tutors may “mature” into mentors. Tutees who become successful may themselves want to become tutors. Students graduate, move on, and so do teachers, administrators, and volunteers. As each program year ends, the evaluation process offers an opportunity not only to remedy deficiencies in the program but also to refresh those aspects that will continue: to refine tutor training, to provide staff inservice about the PT program, and so on.

The individuals involved in the PT program also are often in the best position to help the program grow. Tutors can suggest other students who might make good tutors. Teachers can recommend the program to colleagues and help identify new tutees. Parents and other volunteers can help recruit others to assist with the program. And administrators who see that the PT program pays off with higher rates of student success may be willing partners in finding adequate funding, assisting with scheduling difficulties, and securing adequate tutoring space.

In summary:

- Do take time to assess results against the stated program objectives.
- Do use the annual program evaluation as a time and process for renewal.
• Do tap current people resources to build the program for the future.
Conclusion

Peer tutoring is as valuable for the student tutor as it is for the tutee. Both gain from the interaction. Many tutors say that they understand subject matter better because they are teaching it to another person; and even if the subject matter is less sophisticated than their own studies, they find that the work of tutoring carries over in how they approach what they need to learn in their own classes. Peer tutoring relieves teachers of many reteaching burdens, and the skills students learn through peer tutoring carry over into success in the regular classroom setting.

An effective PT program can be structured with little funding and few material resources, provided that educators, parents, and students — the people resources — come together with a shared vision and a common sense of purpose. The PT facilitator needs these collective strengths in order to plan and set in motion an effective program. And once a small program has achieved success, it can be expanded to serve more students.

The do’s and don’ts in this fastback are the summary points that should be kept in mind when developing a peer tutoring program.
Resources

Note: Several of the resources in this list focus on tutoring adults in reading, but the tips they contain can be helpful in peer tutoring programs.


Cheatham, Judy; Colvin, Ruth Johnson; and Laminack, Lester L. The Collaborative Approach to Literacy Instruction. Syracuse, N.Y.: Literacy Volunteers of America, 1993.


Roller, Cathy. So What’s a Tutor to Do? Newark, Del.: International Reading Association, 1998.
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