

Excerpts from: *Demystifying Adult Literacy for Volunteer Tutors*
A Reference Handbook and Resource Guide

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Chapter Six

DEVELOPING THE TUTOR/LEARNER RELATIONSHIP

Facilitator vs. Teacher

Traditionally, the educational process has placed learners in a passive position. They were seen as "empty vessels" to be filled with knowledge held by the teacher. Adults, however, are people from whom we can also learn a great deal. Seeing adult learners in this way will help you to overcome differences in background and life experiences between yourself and the learner.

Rather than a traditional teacher, the tutor is a facilitator and a resource person, someone who engages the learner in dialogue, or two-way conversation. Learners must feel free to express their ideas and opinions, and to make mistakes. They should be challenged to actively participate in shaping their own learning, which requires developing a critical awareness of themselves as learners. Likewise, tutors must be open to challenges from the learners. (Arnold, et al., 1991)

How to Start?

"Begin by finding some common ground as a meaningful relationship with the tutor is often cited by learners as the reason they remain in literacy programs." (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p.130)

Both you and your learner(s) are likely to feel a bit (or a lot!) nervous at the first meeting. The learners may have anxieties about their ability to learn, be ashamed of their level of literacy, and have a history of negative learning experiences. They will likely lack self-esteem, and be fragile placing themselves in this vulnerable position. You may be questioning your own ability to tutor, and wondering what exactly you're supposed to do now! And you're both wondering what you'll think of each other.

Let the learner know that the purpose of the first meeting is to relax and get to know each other, to find out where the learner is at with literacy and set some goals (i.e. to conduct an initial interview), and to establish a time for your work together. Make the session relaxed, comfortable, informal. Have a coffee or tea. Talk about how you feel. If you admit being nervous, the learner will begin to see you as "human", and may feel more comfortable to talk about their feelings with you.

Show genuine interest in the learner. Exchange information about your background, work, families, interests, hobbies, etc. Over time, find out everything you can about the learner. Be prepared to share information about yourself, and not to expect the learner to do all the work. It's important to show learners right from the beginning that you are willing to take the same risks you ask them to take. This will set the tone for developing a mutual relationship of sharing, trust and respect.

Ask about what they like to do, and what they feels they're good at. You can later go back to some of the things they mention, ask how they learned it, from who, why they think they were able to

learn it, etc. This will give you an immediate opportunity to praise them for their accomplishments, and begin to build up their confidence right from the beginning by showing that they do have the ability to learn. It will also give you and the learner some insight into their preferred learning style, and the conditions under which she learns best.

"Explain that learners' experiences with education and their attitudes and ideas about reading and writing will affect the way you work together. Their perception of the problem, its origins, and any insights they have on the ways they learn best are some of the important contributions they bring to the program. This interview should assist you in selecting appropriate materials and activities, and provide learners with an opportunity to raise questions or to state their concerns about the program." (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p.130)

Ask learners about their past schooling experiences and why they think they didn't learn. This is a good way to gain some insight into the learners' background, to acknowledge that it is not their "fault" that they didn't learn, to empathize with them and show your understanding that there are many reasons why one may not have become literate as a child, and that you don't think it's because they are stupid.

You will also need to have the learners identify their goals, so you can begin lesson planning. Some learners may already be very clear about their goals, while others will need some help figuring out what the options are, and what their goals will be. You may want to just ask the learners what kind of things they are comfortable reading and writing, and what kind of things they would like to be able to read and write. Or you may want to have a variety of materials available and ask them to select some which they are comfortable reading, that they would like to be able to read, etc.

They will likely have both long-term and short-term goals. Encourage them to be specific about her needs. The long-term goals may be very broad (ie. to learn to read and write) and will need to be broken into manageable pieces. This will help prevent both of you from becoming too discouraged. In identifying short-term goals, focus on immediate day-to-day interests or needs, such as grocery shopping, filling out job applications, reading to the children, writing letters, reading and writing for work.

You may feel comfortable conducting the interview very informally, or you may wish to choose a set of questions from the list on the next page. If you use written questions, allow the learner to sit with you, and point to the words as you read the questions. This will help learners to practice identifying the words they already know, and make them feel more in control of the process.

Do some reading and writing in the very first meeting in order to give the learner an immediate sense of accomplishment. You could have learners write or dictate a few lines about themselves - using the language experience approach of writing it down for them, if necessary - and read it back with them. This can be an excellent tool to refer back to, to expand upon, delving deeper into the learner's background, further developing your relationship with them, and providing an endless variety of material for future lessons. It will also be the first item in the learner's work file, for comparison later on.

SAMPLE OBJECTIVES OF A FIRST MEETING

- Spend some time getting acquainted
 - Talk about learning goals
 - Set tone of sessions
 - Establish commitment
 - Complete and sign tutor/student agreement (if applicable)
 - Review student handbook (if applicable). Read together.
 - Have some possible plans for activities
- (Clarke, Mallory. 1991: p. 71)

"Have fun and encourage learning. Enthusiasm is contagious. Be enthusiastic, demonstrate your sense of humour and be an interested audience." (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p. 48)

Methods of Motivation and Reinforcement

- Set realistic short-term goals to provide for immediate successes.
- Accept learners' ideas and answers. (Butler, 1990: p.31)
- Plan for success. Use materials that the learner is interested in and plan for activities that build on what they already know. (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p.47)
- Be positive about the learner's ability to learn. Try to build confidence in the learner. Providing enough information so the learner can make the correct response. (Colvin and Root, 1986: p.63)
- Make sure the learner knows the meaning of new words she learns. Unless she understands the words, and the meaning of text, she is not reading. (Colvin and Root, 1986: p.63)
- Ask who, what, when, where, why and how questions as appropriate to the topic. The purpose is to learn, and to see how well the learner understands what she is reading, not to see how well she can guess the intent of "trick" questions. (Colvin and Root, 1986: p.63)
- Read for enjoyment each session. Find something the learner is interested in and, if they are unable to read it easily, and therefore for enjoyment, you read it to her. If the learner has the skill, but does not read for enjoyment, read some of the material to her. Stop at an exciting part so that the learner will be interested in reading the rest to find out what happens.
- Encourage risk taking. Assure the learner that it is acceptable to make mistakes and encourage them to take chances, explaining that is how we learn. (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p.47)
- Get the learner reading independently as soon as possible, so they know they can. Have them read with book/tape sets, encouraging independent reading at a higher level and increasing vocabulary.
- Praise and encourage the learner each time you have a class tutoring session. Saying 'That's great! You know a few new sight words!' rather than 'You only know a few sight words,' is like the difference between seeing a glass as half empty or half full!
- Be a resource person. Your own ability as a learner can be utilized to check out something, when you are not sure of it. (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p.47)
- Vary tutoring techniques to keep the learner engaged, to make learning fun, and to help the learner understand there are many ways of learning which don't have to be boring or painful.
- Help the learner recognize how much they are learning and how much progress they have made by :
 - Keeping a progress chart of new words learned;
 - Creating a portfolio of their work, dating each piece to show progress over time;
 - Reminding them of the gains they have made;
 - Giving them an opportunity to practice their new skills in meaningful situations (ie. practicing alphabetizing by looking things up in a phone book, index, dictionary, encyclopedia, etc.);
 - Having them read to children, elders or others as they are able to;
 - Rewarding them with a certificate of achievement at certain times in the program, especially when specific goals have been achieved;
 - Keeping a dialogue journal in which they reflect upon their learning experiences. You respond by affirming their feelings, praising their progress, and encouraging them. The fact that you can dialogue with each other in writing will be rewarding in itself.

- Model how you learn and help the learner become aware of how they learn. Developing an awareness of how one learns allows one to have greater control over the learning process and develop greater independence. (Ennis and Woodrow, 1992: p.47)

"The process of the learner's discovery of their voices as writers is the most dramatic step toward becoming literate." (Weinstein as quoted in Thomas, 1990: p. 21)

- You can help the learner discover their voice by:
 - Being an interested audience for their writings;
 - Having them participate in authors' circles, where they share their work with each other;
 - Creating a newsletter where they can have their materials published for others to read;
 - Publishing a collection of learners' writings in a professional looking newspaper, magazine or book.(Butler, 1990; Colvin and Root, 1986; Ennis and Woodrow, 1992; Fry, 1992; GNWT Literacy Office.)

Interpersonal Communication Skills

(Fretz and Paul, 1994: p. 315)

Interpersonal communication is a skill which requires conscious practice. It includes both speaking and listening, as well as sending and receiving non-verbal messages such as gestures, facial expressions, and distance put between ourselves and others.

Communicating effectively through speaking requires making sure that the message is clear, specific and complete. A tutor providing information or instructions to a learner should speak in short sentences using simple vocabulary. Speak slowly enough, pausing between sentences, for the information to be absorbed before moving on. And ask for feedback to see if the listener interpreted the message the way it was intended.

Since the large majority of all interpersonal communication is non-verbal, it is important to be aware of how you communicate non-verbally. This includes gestures, facial expressions, body language, and the amount of space we put between ourselves and others. It is important for effective communication that our words and our non-verbal communication match, otherwise we may be sending very mixed messages.

It is also important to be aware that different forms of body language and non-verbal communication can mean different things in different cultures. Be aware that differences may exist, and observe the learners non-verbal communication to see if you can familiarize yourself with some of the differences, and avoid sending unintended negative messages.

"The ability to listen and learn from [learners] builds mutual respect. It affirms the dignity of all; it is the basis of empowerment. To listen is to be on an equal footing; listening means putting yourself in the place of the other... The art of listening is an important pillar in building structures that counter-act some deeply ingrained, top-down teaching habits.

At the base of all this is the educator's genuine belief in people's potential and willingness to let go of some power and control. An authentic relationship of dialogue [will develop as learners] feel the underlying belief and trust of the [tutor]. Becoming honest, open, and vulnerable is not easy; it is a struggle."

(Source: Arnold, et al., 1991: p. 162)

- Another key to effective communication is active listening, which helps to ensure that a message is received correctly. According to Fretz and Paul (1994), active listening involves several components:
- Listen attentively. Don't interrupt or judge what is being said. Concentrate solely on getting the message straight.
- Check understanding. When the speaker is finished, rephrase or paraphrase the message (put it in your own words) and ask if you have it right.
- Clarify. If you don't quite understand, ask questions to *clarify the meaning only*, not to question the sentiments expressed.
- Summarize the message. Reflect back the main points of the message.
- Reflect upon the message. Think about what has been said.
- To listen effectively:
 - show interest through encouragement (make eye contact, nod your head, lean forward) or interested silence, allowing the learner time to think about what she's saying;
 - try to understand the other person's point of view;
 - express support or empathy;
 - provide door-openers, cues which invite the learner to speak (You seem quiet today. You look excited! How did it go?)
 - ask open-ended questions to encourage the learner to elaborate (Can you tell me a little more about that? How did that make you feel? What is it that you don't understand?)
 - help the speaker understand her own problem by restating it;
 - encourage the speaker to solve her problem.
 - ask follow-up questions for clarification
 - be non-judgmental
- To listen effectively, avoid:
 - interrupting;
 - arguing, or reacting aggressively;
 - closing your mind to points of view different from your own;
 - jumping to conclusions;
 - giving too much advice;
 - making assumptions;
 - letting your own thoughts interfere.

Maintaining Boundaries

Developing a positive and supportive relationship between the tutor and learner is critical to the learner's success. However, learners sometimes want or need support beyond what can be reasonably expected of a volunteer tutor. They may: want help with social services, or dealing with family, personal, or legal problems; ask to borrow money, bus tickets, personal belongings; expect favours, such as giving them rides or helping them get a job; or they may want to start socializing as friends or even be interested in a romantic or sexual relationship.

As you can imagine, there can be a fine line between your role as a supportive and trusted tutor, and being a counsellor, social worker or friend to the learner. But as long as the tutor continues to provide support beyond the tutoring role, they are giving the learner the message that these expectations are acceptable. The learner may continue pushing, until the relationship has gone much beyond appropriate limits.

Remember that in your role as volunteer tutor you are not a psychologist, social worker, counsellor, etc. and cannot take the risk of taking on these roles and giving advice or support that you are not qualified nor authorized to be giving. Rather than providing counselling or finding additional services and support learner the learner, it is usually more appropriate to help the learner find out how to access the services or information for themselves.

It is important to clarify with your program coordinator the role, responsibilities and boundaries of volunteer tutors. If this is not discussed in your program's orientation or training, ask the program coordinator about it. Find out, what you're supposed to do if the learner makes requests of you which are inappropriate, or simply beyond your role and/or expertise as a volunteer tutor. It may be, to some degree, a matter of comfort level on the part of the volunteer tutor to decide when to help and when to refer the learner to someone else. Ideally, the program coordinator will clarify the role of the volunteer tutor with the learner from the beginning.

Appreciating Cultural Differences

"..just in showing that we have taken the time to learn about and relate to the symbols and images of various cultural and class groupings we have the potential of lessening social distance. We can establish that these are things we share; these are things that define group membership and identity.

When we try to speak in the other's language, however imperfectly, we communicate powerfully that we accept the other. Symbols and images are more complex, but equally powerful. Everyday behavior, ordinary forms of interchange, ways of acknowledging ourselves and others; these are all symbols. Our willingness to recognize these symbols and accept what is intended by them is a way of lessening social distance." (Arnold, Rick et al., 1991: p. 156)

Culture is a complex system of beliefs, values, languages, life experiences ways of behaving and world view shared by a particular group of people at any given time. Culture includes the political, economic, social, and religious systems of a group of people. It also includes material aspects of life, such as songs, dances, food, dress, jewelry, types of transportation, styles of housing, decoration, architecture, and art forms.

Seen in this way, culture is something which may define distinct racial or ethnic groups, but may also define sub-cultures, such as "street" culture, "youth" culture, "prison" culture, "yuppie" culture, "arts" culture, "gay/lesbian" culture, "urban" and "rural" culture, or the sub-cultures found within specific clubs, organizations or institutions.

There are often obvious cultural differences between learners and tutors: such as education, race, socio-economic class, and place of residence (i.e. inner city vs. suburbs). These differences create an immediate power imbalance between the tutor and learner. It is important to recognize these differences, and to be aware that learners "are sensitive to how [tutors] display a knowledge and appreciation of their values, life experiences, issues and concerns." (Arnold, et al., 1991: p. 156.)

It can be very helpful for a tutor to develop an awareness of the culture and background of the learner, in order to reduce tensions, and bring a greater degree of trust and understanding to their relationship. You may want to read books and articles about the learner's country, culture and language, and learn their greetings and farewells. Become familiar with a current map of their country, the religions, major holidays and some current events. You may want to read a novel, view movies or documentary films by and about people from that country or culture (i.e. about immigrating to Canada, a refugee experience, attending residential school, traditional Aboriginal teachings, growing up on a First Nations reserve, a farm, prison life, street culture, single-parent hood, poverty or addictions).

Exploring both the similarities and the differences between yourself and your learner(s) can be very exciting and rewarding. The trick is in drawing out and celebrating the diversity of knowledge and experiences shared between you, which make the world a much more interesting place, and which mean you can learn from one another. It shows that you have a genuine interest in your student and an openness to share information about yourself, which contributes a great deal to creating a relationship of mutual respect. This sharing and respect will strengthen the relationship as you come to know, trust and understand each other better.

Focusing only on cultural *differences* between you and the learner(s), or between learners, carries with it the danger of stereotyping, and can give the message that one's differences make one less worthy. Despite one's membership in a particular culture or group, each person also has their own personal history, background, knowledge and life experiences. Coming from very different cultural or class backgrounds, you may think that you couldn't possibly have anything in common. However, is it possible that you both: are about the same age? have the same religion? grew up on farms? are the same gender? were an only child? love sports? movies? dancing? grew up with only one parent? travelled? have children?

If you have any of a myriad of life experiences in common, then you have some common ground from which to begin exploring both the similarities *and* the differences in those shared experiences. Other aspects of one's life experiences which contribute to individual culture or identity may include: race, ethnicity, language, education, social class, family size and structure (single-parent, same sex parents, nuclear or extended family); ability/disability; geographic location; place of origin; hobbies or interests, etc.

To give an example, you may think that a woman from Manitoba (whether Christian, Jewish, Aboriginal, Goddess-inspired, or atheist) would have little common ground for discussion with a Muslim man from Turkey. However, both of these people come from cultures or religions which have ways of marking major life events such as a birth, marriage or death. What are the differences and similarities in how these events are honoured? What are the roles of men, women, children, elders in these activities? What kinds of things are used in the ceremonies or celebrations and what is the significance? How long do such occasions last? What is the significance of who attends? When, where, what, why and how do things take place? Do they take place on a certain day of the week? Why? What kind of food is eaten and why? Do different people eat different things, or at different times? What kinds of gifts are given, to whom, and why? Do people cry? Who? Why?

This type of exploration can be applied to an endless array of real-life situations, can continuously strengthen the tutor/learner relationship through mutual sharing of meaningful information can reinforce for the learner that their life experiences and knowledge are interesting and valuable, and can provide a wide diversity of material for lesson planning. Caution: Be sensitive to the learner's willingness to talk about certain things. Some things which you speak openly about in your culture may be uncomfortable or even taboo subjects for the learner.

A Quick Cultural Quiz

(Adapted from Regina Public Library, ESL Tutor Training Workshop (draft).)

How many of these questions can you answer about your learner's language and culture?

Meals

How many meals are usually eaten in a day?

At what times?

What is the main meal?

What foods are usually served at the main meals?
Who prepares and serves the meals?
Who eats first, second, third? Or does the whole family eat together?
Are any foods considered sacred or used in religious rituals? which ones?
What is their significance?

Gestures

What gestures are commonly used for greetings? Formal? Informal?
What gesture is used when asking for silence? for getting someone's attention? for calling someone over?
How is approval shown at concerts or public performances? At meals?

Names

What is a typical full name?
When and how does a person receive their name?
In what order are family names written? (family name first, etc.?)
How much significance is given to the meaning of a name?
How do names and titles change when a person is married? Widowed? Divorced?
Are there any rules about using names? Any special forms of address depending on relationships between people (i.e. husband/wife; children/parents/elders, etc.)?

Human/Animal Relations

Is it common to have pets? What kind of pets?
Where are pets kept?
What happens to pets if they get sick?

Numbers

What numbers are regarded as lucky? Unlucky? Why?

Colours

What colours mean happiness? Mourning?
Which colours carry special symbolism? (purity, love, death, femininity, masculinity)
Which colours have special ceremonial significance? (marriage, birth, death, fertility)

Holiday

What are the three most important holidays?
What is their significance? Are they religious?
When are they? How are they celebrated?

Time

How is the date written in full form? Abbreviated form?
If you are invited to dinner at 6:00 pm, when is the polite time to arrive? What should you bring for the host?

Addresses and Telephone Numbers

How are addresses written on envelopes?
What are some common abbreviations used in addresses and what do they mean?
How are telephone numbers written and said?

Taboos

What are three subjects or actions which are generally considered to be taboo?

Chapter Six References

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