Finding the Answers to Being a Tutor

by Meera Kumbhani

When I began group tutoring this quarter, I did not have a single worry in my head. I even went as far as to wonder why I would need a tutor training class. But as cocky as I was, I was hit hard with reality the week my Adjunct Skills sessions began. Suddenly I was up at the chalkboard with 10 strangers staring at me, silently wondering if they would benefit at all from me. And as I reproduced the instructor’s lectures on bacteria, I realized: I had no idea what I was doing.

That afternoon, I was quick to swallow my pride and I turned to the only thing I knew would help me- my tutor-training folder. Having hundreds of questions and worries and concerns running through my head, I had no trouble completing my first assignment: asking my senior tutor three questions. My questions were:

1. When you have an agenda for the Adjunct Skills session, how do you stay with the agenda when some students may not be ready to move on and/or others have been ready to move on for a while?

2. How can you add variety in a class? How can you make it fun?

3. How do you deal with communication problems with students who do not have English as their first language?

While my senior tutor and other more experienced tutors gave me wonderful answers to my questions, I soon realized that I needed to find my own solutions through more experience. As the quarter comes to a close, I remember the hopelessness I felt that first week, and I think about how much I have learned since. Through a process involving trial and error as well as a conscious connection with my tutees, I have developed my own answers to my questions.

Agendas are always tentative. No tutor in touch with her tutees can always rigidly stay with an agenda. Through experience, a tutor learns how to feel when students are ready to move on and when they are not. Even though an agenda may be set to discuss Subject A for 7 minutes and Subject B for 4 minutes, a tutor cannot just switch subjects if the tutees are not ready to move on. Otherwise, they are left partially understanding two subjects rather than completely understanding any subjects. A tutor must also remember what subjects are more important and allow more time for them. Also, a tutor must move with the majority of a group, even if that means leaving some people behind or leaving others bored. When you can’t please everybody, it is always best to please as many as possible. Through practice, knowing when to move on or keep working has become second nature to me as long as I mentally stay with my tutees.

There is a method that can be used to try to please everybody. When people who understand and people who need more explanation divide the class, both parties can be served by telling the former to explain the material to the latter. This way, the ones who need more explanation get that explanation while the ones who already understand can reinforce their own knowledge through teaching it to others.
To add variety and fun to my sessions, I used some techniques taught in Tutor Training and I tried some of my own techniques as well. I found that games and quizzes always worked very well, for many reasons. One is that it gives the students sample test questions with the same pressure they might experience while actually taking a test. Therefore it serves as a practice exam. Another reason is that games bring out the competitive nature in people and it made the tutees want to know the answers and win the game. And finally, any chance to bribe students with a candy-like prize will add fun to the class. I also found that having the tutees go in a circle and take turns answering helped encourage or force some of the quieter students to participate and kept the overly participatory students from overshadowing the rest.

Another technique I found helpful was free writing. Although free writing may be unconventional for a biology tutorial, it really helped draw the tutees’ focus away from whatever was going on before class and into the present moment. It also helped them recall course material and remember specific problems they were having with it. Also, since all of the free writes I assigned dealt with the big picture of biology, it helped them remember why they were learning the material and what importance it has on the world and life as a whole.

Since communication is the number one tool used to connect with your tutees, my third question may be the most important of the three. A lot of my tutees come from other countries and speak in thick accents. Just as I have trouble understanding them, I am sure they have trouble understanding me as well. However, through more attempts at communication, the understanding has gotten better on both parts.

My main concern, however, was making a tutee feel abnormal because of my inability to understand him or her. What I realized is that language barriers are a fact of life and that only constant effort can break them. To understand what my tutees were trying to tell me, I would simply have to ask and ask and ask until I understood. At first I thought this would be insulting to them, but now I believe it shows them I care enough to keep trying. To ensure they can understand me, I do my best to speak slowly and clearly and I encourage them to ask me to repeat myself when necessary.

Tutoring is a learning process and I cannot go through a single session without learning something completely new about people, cognition, and myself. Through trial and error, each tutor can find his or her own style of tutoring. I have come to realize that a tutor will almost always know what to do in a session if she maintains a connection with her tutees. The answers to most tutors’ questions lie in this connection; tutors simply need to be aware enough to find them.