

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

The Art of Being an Adjunct Skills Tutor

by an Anatomy and Physiology group tutor

Most students start tutoring for all the right idealistic reasons: they want to help others, they enjoy their subject, they want to try teaching, they like giving to other people, etc. The Tutor and Academic Skills Center is a powerful magnet for these wonderful people. If you're one of those beautiful people, sign-on and read no further. But if you're a rugged individualist, a hard-nosed pragmatist, or even a die-hard follower of Ayn Rand, then this essay is for you. What you need to know are the lesser known, hidden benefits of being an Adjunct Skills tutor...

Want the scoop on which instructors and courses to take and which ones to avoid? The tutor community is your information haven. Want to learn your subject better? There's no better way to learn it than to teach it someone else. Want to get to know your faculty better? You get thirty minutes of them all to yourself every week. Want another bullet on your resume? Go ahead and picture it in your favorite font... Adjunct Skills Tutor at DeAnza College... oh yeah, it looks studly, doesn't it?

Maybe you're thinking hmmm...how do I get this job? Do I have to interview? The "interview" is a simple review of the job description with the nicest woman you'll ever meet. The only question you'll have to answer is why you want to be a tutor and that one's easy; just recite the "good" reasons in the opening sentence of this essay without suspiciously reading them off of the back of your hand.

In the interest of full disclosure, it's time to throw in some of the Bad and the Ugly. Tutoring can be tough work. Have you ever envisioned throttling another human being with your bare hands? Just kidding...that's only a pre-tutor worry, not the real thing. Your worst possible day as a tutor will leave you frustrated and feeling like you didn't get through to your students. No throwing chairs or pounding desktops. Tantrums are for kids and high school band instructors.

You will learn, without fully realizing it, how to do things that successful business people learn early in their careers: how to create and follow or appropriately modify a group agenda, how to encourage instructive behaviors, how to deal with difficult people, how to roll with the bad days as well as the good, how to think on your feet and handle being "put on the spot", how to keep a group of people with different agendas on task, how to empower individuals without stepping on others, and how to listen and learn from the people in your group.

If you're thinking, Eeek! I don't know how to do any of that! Don't worry; neither do many managers who get paid a lot more than we do. You're not expected to know how to do a single thing on that list. That's why the learning center staff is there and that's why you'll take the tutor training class; they are there to support you. The support staff are the most friendly, helpful people on campus. And your fellow students in the training class are so positive and energetic

that you will wonder what drugs they are on. They will bring out the best in you even if you're having a bad day.

Maybe you're really worried about not knowing the answer to a student's question. You can use that as a teaching aid. When you're not there, they have to know how to find the answer to a question so go through the steps with them...encourage them to try to find it in their lecture notes or the textbook and re-channel them when they get stuck or off-track. Not everything we want to know about life is found in textbooks so remind them about other resources too. The most underrated resource on campus is instructor's office hours. Many DeAnza students have never visited an instructor during office hours or even understand that the office hours are for the students.

Maybe you're worried that the students will just sit there and stare at you. I had one group like that. At first, I tried to drag them through sessions, answering many of their review questions because nobody would say anything. Then, I tried to make them call on each other using the Name Bounce technique and that didn't work so well because they just bounced the question to each other until it got to the one student (out of 10) who had good lecture notes and knew the answer. Finally, at the end of the term, I figured out how to deal with these never-prepared students. They were each assigned a question at the start of the session to present to the other students and they were given 15 minutes to prepare. Miraculously, this worked. Try it out and pass it on!

For me, the most difficult part of tutoring was the time it took from my schedule. It's not the couple of hours you spend tutoring. It's the hours you spend thinking about the tutoring or worrying about the students or preparing for your next session. But even this problem can be solved. And here's the secret: Don't prepare for a session and see what happens. Assign things for the students to teach each other. Put down the pencil. Stop talking. Make them teach. Watch them learn.

Drink your coffee and get paid for it.