The State of Tutoring in America:

Changing the Culture about Tutoring

by

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At a time of great controversy in American education, the role of the tutor and tutoring has been given new prominence by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The proposed use of "supplemental services" has increased the interest level in tutoring on the part of both schools and parents. However, tutoring is beset by serious professional issues that may limit the effectiveness of these services for American schoolchildren.

Many of these concerns are cultural, others strike at the theoretical and empirical foundations of tutoring. They can be summarized under four major headings:

1. The need for tutoring versus the perceived value of tutoring,

2. The essential nature of tutoring, i.e., what is tutoring?

3. Changing the current culture about tutors and tutoring,

4. Tutoring at the crossroad.

Issue #1: Need versus Perceived Value

The American public purchases between $8-10 billion of tutoring services annually (2004 estimate). Currently this seems to be driven by two major factors. First, the continuing national and international reports that find far too many U.S. students and adults are educationally deficient in some respect. Their literacy skills are low (National Assessment of Adult Literacy Survey, 1994, 2005), up to fifty percent of our urban youth fail to graduate from high school (Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, and the Urban Institute, 2004), or Americans are reading less (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

The second factor may be the dramatic increase in so-called high-stakes testing as part of NCLB. Many parents are fearful that their child might be retained.

Yet just as the demand for tutors is increasing, teacher shortages are also growing across America. The demographic shift has begun that will see many baby boomers retiring from the classroom. By 2010 up to 22 million new teachers will be needed in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics). The supply of professional, expert tutors is going down particularly in the areas of reading disabilities, learning disabilities, and higher math and science. (These areas have traditionally required the most tutors.) Therefore, the price for high-quality, expert tutoring is going up and will keep rising.

But the real irony of this educational shortage in the making is that the general American public has never recognized the "tutor" as a professional with well-defined expertise. From the consumers' viewpoint, "almost anyone can tutor." Thus the great majority of parents look for the lowest-price tutoring available in their community or alternatively for free, volunteer-based tutoring.

The end result for the need versus perceived value issue is that though the public wants more tutoring, they view tutoring as a "one size fits all" activity. If anyone can do it, why pay a higher price for an expert, professional tutor?

Issue #2: The Essential Nature of Tutoring or What Is Tutoring?

The general public and schooling professionals differ in their perception of tutoring. The general public's viewpoints commonly fall into three categories.

1. The most common viewpoint is that tutors are paid or volunteer homework helpers. Many parents see tutoring as a very short-term activity, such as getting homework done, preparing for a test, or helping to boost a grade in a subject. The tutor is a helper "who puts out the fire."

2. Another common perception is that tutors are volunteers or paid helpers in elementary or high schools, college learning centers, community centers, or sometimes, a local church. They act as tutors, or in some cases, mentors, usually focusing on the short-term, immediate learning emergency.

3. Less widely known are paid professional tutors who offer extensive help centering on diagnostic/developmental tutoring. Their focus is helping a student learn how to learn as well as building skills. These tutors tend to be used for a longer duration, typically tutoring a student from 3 to 6 months.

Among schooling professionals, tutoring is generally viewed at best as good-intentioned help provided by volunteers and education amateurs. At worst, schooling professionals view tutoring as commercial hucksterism using fear to exploit the public for a quick profit.

These views are supported by at least four basic cultural tensions between schooling professionals and tutors.

1. The schooling bias against tutoring has historic roots. The rise of the common school replaced tutoring in the home as the basis of American literacy. The use of a tutor is a step backward. (See Centuries of Tutoring: A History of Alternative Education in America and Western Europe.)

2. There is a bias against using peer tutoring in school classrooms. The predominant images of "being students and teacher" can best be summed up by the medieval monastery rule, "It belongeth to the master to speak and to teach; it becometh the disciple to be silent and to listen." Students should be trained as passive observers rather than trained to become active participants as peer tutors in their own education. (See Peer Tutoring: A Teacher's Resource Guide.)

3. Paid professional private tutors are only for the rich. Learning in school is the bedrock of the republic, while private home tutoring is elitist and almost "Un-American." Using a private tutor also implies that the teacher has failed. Parents do not have the expertise to make that judgment.

4. Tutoring is not "real education." No significant research has been published proving that it works. Tutoring methods and practices have not been defined nor is tutoring a defined career area in the education profession.

The end result of answering the question, "What is tutoring?" is that the general public and most schooling professionals see tutoring as having relatively low value. Tutoring is certainly not a profession universally recognized by American popular culture or by the education establishment. The bottom line is that the culture expects tutoring to be informal, quick, and cheap, or even free. The tutor is an "automaton." Almost anyone can be a tutor. This is the overall cultural environment in which tutoring has been struggling for the past 30 plus years and even before.

Issue #3: Changing the Culture – Attitudes and Expectations about Tutors and Tutoring

Part One: "Views from the Top"

In March 2004, I had the opportunity to attend the meeting of the Education Industry Leadership Board held in Washington, D.C. At the conference were owners of private tutoring programs, the large corporate and franchise tutoring centers, such Sylvan, Huntington etc., school management companies, such as Edison Schools, and investment bankers

Christopher Whittle, CEO and founder of the Edison Schools, Inc., gave a notable presentation on "The Future of the Education Industry." In 1991 Chris Whittle, Checker Finn, and several others founded the Edison Schools. At that time there were only 5 for-profit and non-profit school management companies. In 2004 there are 50.

Whittle divided his presentation into two parts: what he learned from the past, and what he expects to happen in the future.

From past lessons, he admitted that they made at least four big mistakes.

1. It was "much harder" than they originally thought. Whittle admitted they were incredibly arrogant to think that they only needed to apply the concepts of sound business management with their own school reform ideas to achieve marvelous results in student school achievement. He said they learned that if effective school reform was that easy, schools would have been changed earlier. They had to literally "invent" new management, administration, and curriculum systems from scratch.

2. They wildly underestimated the investment need and the cost of running a "good school."

3. Their profit margin "on a good day" was 15% not the 40% they and other business people had expected.

4. Mixing the public schools with a publicly traded education corporation is a "deadly combination." That is why Whittle converted the Edison Schools back to a closely-held private company.

Overall such candor on the part of Whittle was refreshing to hear. He has long been considered the "dean" of for-profit schooling. Many of the same cultural issues affecting school management companies are also an influence on how tutoring services will be delivered across the United States in the future.

Regarding the future, Whittle saw two major trends:

1. He sees "a-la-carte systems" selling specific educational services to schools.

2. He believes that these educational services will evolve into thousand of talented professional educators partnering or collaborating with schools to deliver these educational services across the United States.

Finally in his view from the top, Whittle identified three popular cultural biases regarding educational services that need to be addressed:

1. "People have lost their sense of outrage." The general public and educators no longer are shocked about reports detailing how poorly many Americans are being educated.

2. "People think everything is spun so much." Americans in general do not know who to believe or trust regarding education results and proposed reforms.

3. "We are not the enemy." An underlying perception exists that most fee-based educational services are based on greed and have a high risk of potential corruption. Far too often, the for-profit education industry generates headlines like a nail scraping across a classroom chalkboard. Federal investigations, or falsification of student records are not the type of "research" we need to publish.

Issue III: Changing the Culture: Attitudes and Expectations about Tutoring and Tutors

Part Two: View from the Tutoring Firing Line

When we were children many of us used to play, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Remember the old childhood rhyme?

> "Rich man, poor man
> Beggar man, thief,
> Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief."

How many children wanted to become a teacher? What about a tutor? The professional tutor is an education expert, a specialist. The professional tutor is not a "homework helper." The professional tutor is not a "volunteer."

Over the past 30 years a body of research has come into being that will help define for the general public and school systems two key elements of tutoring:

1. The components of an effective tutoring curriculum and what constitutes tutoring best practices,

2. The background of a professional tutor in terms of education and experience.

A review of these issues will appear in Tutoring Research and Student Achievement: Best Practices and Policy Implications (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), co-authored by this writer; Ronald R. Morgan, Loyola University; Judith A. Ponticell, University of South Florida; and Charles J. O'Malley, a consultant with the U.S. Department of Education.

From our preliminary research we have identified at least ten components that will help make tutors and tutoring more effective.

1. Tutors can be effective regardless of their training and education by just giving students more personal attention. However, teacher education, prior professional experience, and specialized training as a tutor can make a major difference. More professionally prepared tutors consistently produce significantly higher levels of student achievement than tutors with little or no special preparation.
2. Tutors need to use a diagnostic/developmental template to organize and implement each student's tutoring program.
3. The tutors must be able to track the session to session progress of each student in order to modify tutoring content and use student academic strengths to overcome weaknesses.

4. Principles of learning drawn from both cognitive and constructivist thinking seem to offer the strongest contemporary tutoring methods.
5. Tutors need to use continuous feedback to help students develop positive self-images as learners.
6. Formal/informal assessment needs to be used throughout the tutoring process.
7. Mentoring/coaching students on "learning how to learn" through providing guidance on study habits, test taking, and attention to school and learning in general is a significant informal part of effective tutoring.
8. Mentoring/coaching each student's parents on sustaining the day-to-day learning process in the home after the tutoring ceases is an important role for effective tutors.
9. To facilitate the coaching of parents, it is desirable to conduct the tutoring in the student's own home outside of school hours. If this is not possible, a community center or library can be used, but an effort to provide mentoring to the parents should still be made.
10. Throughout the tutoring, tutors must collaborate closely with each student's classroom teacher. The final measure of the effectiveness of the tutoring is the short-term and long-term improvement of the student's day-to-day classroom achievement. Close tutor-teacher collaboration will help maximize effective tutoring.

At its core defining who "professional tutors" are and what "effective tutoring" is constitutes a quality versus a quantity issue.

- Higher quality Professional tutoring provided by expert, professionally trained tutor using a research-based tutoring curriculum.
  or
- More quantity The continuing utilization of paid homework helpers or volunteers who use an "ad hoc, tutor directed" instruction program that requires little or no specialized training.

The end result is that changing cultural attitudes and expectations will mean better defining the who, what, why, when where, and how of tutors and tutoring if the general public and other professional educators are ever going to recognize that a tutoring profession exists and that quality tutoring is effective in increasing student achievement:

Who we are – preparation of a professional tutor.

What we do – effective tutoring curricula exists.

Why it works – how tutoring best practices use principles from the psychology of learning.

When does tutoring become effective – How much time on task is needed?

Where does it happen best – Under what conditions do we get best results?

How do we ensure a high-quality tutoring program?

Issue #4: Tutoring at the Crossroad

Tutoring is now at an educational crossroad. Either professional tutoring becomes recognized as an "education discipline" and defined as a "professional career," or tutoring will remain essentially a non-professional activity using low-paid educators or unpaid amateurs.

"Professional tutoring" offers important opportunities for significantly improving the achievement of students in the classroom. The establishment of a recognized tutoring profession requires two courses of action:

1. Credible research on tutoring must be published by researchers and practitioners.

2. Colleges and universities across America need to create courses on tutoring research, curricula, and instructional methods.

There has always been a dynamic tension between practice and research. But one always needs the other in order to survive and thrive. For many years I have kept a foot firmly entrenched in both these camps. There are many people sitting in this audience that know just as much, if not more, about tutoring than I do.

Last year in Boston I invited all of you to begin collaborating to get our "real world" knowledge publicly recognized by publishing our results, so that these tutoring best practices can increase student achievement.

I again humbly renew this personal plea, for the future greater good of the tutoring profession. As a result of this critical situation, we should be greatly concerned with the potential political backfire of regulations aimed at dictating what does or does not constitute evidence-based tutoring practices and true "science" in tutoring research. We are not advocating that tutoring policy changes be based on the field notes and data of a few researchers. Instead, I believe that we can all bring something of value to the community of tutoring researchers.

Today, I am challenging all of you to carefully think about that future. In the past other occupations reached a critical level of activity to then emerge from their amateur status and become a recognized profession through research.

For example, I recall the years I taught in a Master's Degree program in Corporate Training and Development. It was a long struggle for adult educators, through such organizations as the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), before American business culture began accepting the career of the training professional. This battle still continues to this very day.

In the same vein, I now challenge all the tutoring professional societies: the Education Industry Association, and the Association of Tutoring Professionals to fight the same fight for the recognition of tutoring as a professional career through its members' research activities.

These professional associations and other concerned individuals must begin collaborating with institutions of higher education to offer courses on tutoring that will begin to define this profession.

The American public deserves our high-quality professional tutoring services. Many of us are now achieving excellent results for our students, but are weighed down by the lack of public recognition for our professional results simply because no one knows about them.

Let us stand together and help tutors and tutoring become a recognized professional career, and leave behind a lesser amateur status for the volunteers! We are America's tutoring professionals! This is our responsibility, not that of the federal government!

The time has come for professional tutors to assume our rightful place as an important component of American education reform, so we can help more students improve their chances of attaining the American dream.

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