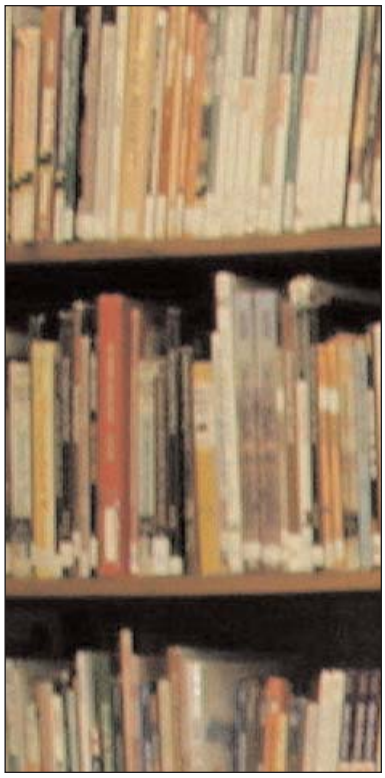
Literacy

Mary began tutoring because she had known an adult who couldn't read and this made a big impression on her when she was young. Observing the situation, Mary saw how much it affected issues of self-esteem, financial success and everyday functioning. Plus, she saw that it affected this person's children, who seemed worried others would find out. When she saw a sign seeking literacy tutors at the library, it occurred to her that here was a chance to make a difference in someone's life. *"I like the fact that I am doing something outside of myself,"* she explained when we talked with her the first year. *"I am reaching out of my network."* Tutoring is not the only volunteer work she does. She also volunteers for Meals on Wheels. She explains it this way. *"I guess I have become more aware of how each day we have a choice of how we impact other people and how we choose to spend our time. We can make a big difference in our own lives and other peoples' lives, too."*

Mary had been tutoring the same young woman for over a year when we interviewed her the first year. Her learner is around the same age as her own two daughters, both of whom live a distance away. Although Mary could be described as an empty nester, she made great efforts to see her grown children and grandchildren, making trips to be with them almost every month. She was also putting forth great effort to be with her learner every week. But Mary took it all in stride, describing her learner as *"similar to a daughter."* She said the learner needed this because her own mother *"wasn't much help to her in her life."* This fact dictated a lot of the literacy



lessons Mary conducted with her. Her learner's children needed help, her learner needed help adjusting to her marriage and raising her children.

When we asked Mary to describe the techniques she used in her tutoring sessions, she said *"we often begin with a discussion of the current issues in her week, those that need some advising."* She said *"I remember from when I was young, I would have loved a mentor."* Mary is in her '50s and feels her age gives her great perspective. Plus, she has very good relationships with her own daughters and enjoys the role of mother. But Mary's main goal in the tutoring session is *"to make some progress." "I try to find out what her needs are. For instance she didn't know how to write checks and was bringing her 11 year old niece along to write her checks."* This type of need was addressed with explanations and practice and confidence building. But in addition to life lessons, *"we follow a standard text and actually another friend who is tutoring gave me a whole page of open ended sentences and I have her write a page or two and I think it has been really useful."*

When we talked with Mary the second year, she was still tutoring the same young woman. Her learner had passed her citizenship test, for which they studied and practiced answering 100 questions. *"That was a lot of memory work for her, and she needs it because she has trouble remembering material."* Was she tested for learning disabilities, we asked? *"Yes, she has been tested and the biggest problem*

After interviewing our learners and tutors for three years, we were awed by the significant changes that had occurred for both groups, but especially for the learners. They had changed in a multitude of ways and, naturally, many of the changes were directly related to literacy such as better reading skills, more interest in reading and writing and better ability to help their children with literacy tasks. Other changes were personal and social. As we have already discussed, learners changed their self-concepts and social networks and their confidence in being able to solve problems. Our challenge was to understand how the literacy lessons contributed to such dramatic and far-reaching changes. This was difficult to ascertain for several reasons, the most important being that the literacy lessons were private and so what happened during a session was only witnessed by the two individuals involved. Second, California libraries do not test learners on a single, standardized basis (libraries use a variety of assessments according to what they deem most appropriate to their learner population) so reported changes in reading and writing for this study were anecdotal. As a result, we have no pre and post analyses of reading level or comprehension or writing skill. In the absence of

is her memory." This year, they were working with phonics and this seemed to really help. They were also reading books and finding real world information because the learner was doing some traveling and was unsure about how to read road signs. *"I am not always sure we are making progress,"* Mary explained, *"but then she will come to a session and tell me all the new things she did that week because she was able to read."*

The last year we interviewed Mary, she and her husband had moved to be closer to their grown children and Mary was already tutoring in the local library. This time, she had as a learner *"an immigrant who is struggling with the language."* Mary was busy trying to figure out the right techniques to use with this new learner. *"We will use what the library provides for us and we will supplement with real-life materials." "Plus, a great technique is to read to her and have her read to me. This helps her conversational skills."*

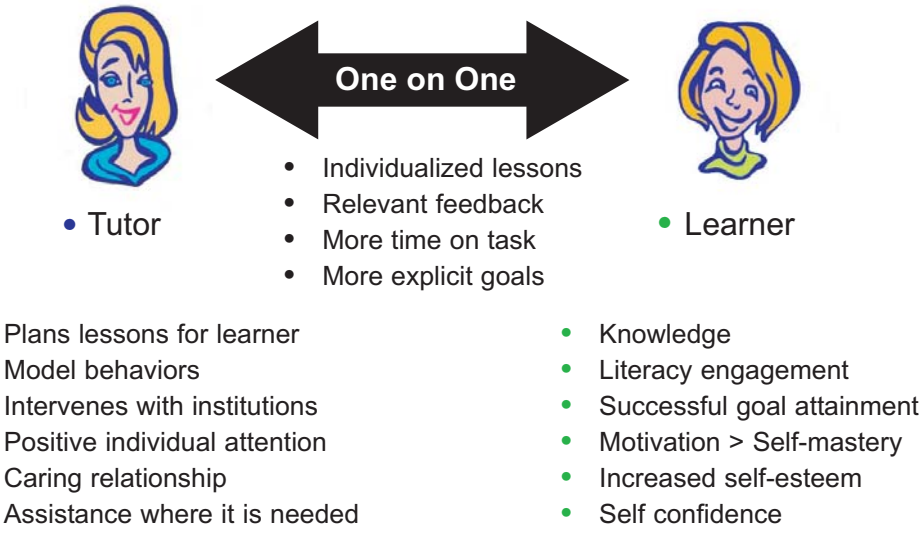
That's what tutoring is for Mary. Always adjusting to what the learner needs and trying to find new techniques that work. She is the type of person to go that extra mile and try to make a difference, and *"make some progress."* In these ways she is like most of the volunteers who tutor in library literacy programs. It is because they are so committed to making progress and because they are in a one-on-one or small group tutoring situation that they are able to be flexible and address the individual needs and learning styles of their adult learners.

numerical evidence of actual literacy change, we have tried to speculate about the ways that big changes could come about due to a one-on-one literacy tutoring program.

One thing is clear: whatever happened due to participation in the literacy program happened in the tutoring sessions. This was the time that the learner and tutor spent together talking, reading, studying new ideas, and working on reading children's literature. How could the process of learning itself (that is, taking in new information, remembering it and using it appropriately later) have such a big overall effect? Kansanen (2003) says that literacy appears to be key to personal and social development but there has not been enough attention paid to the instructional process itself and how it promotes such changes. One key to the instructional process is the interaction between teacher and student. Teachers are responsible for passing along the requisite knowledge while helping students become motivated and, more importantly, turning that motivation into action. This happens in a mutual relationship where there are joint activities intended to assist the students in acquiring information. Furthermore, the teacher/tutor can be aware of the student's strengths

Figure 1

The Advantages of One-on One



and needs and therefore present information in an efficacious manner. How does this relate to our one-on-one tutoring sessions? Figure 1 shows the tasks performed and roles played by both learner and tutor.

As this figure shows, each participant has her own roles and experiences but it is the interaction between them that is key. Tutoring is a time-honored method of assisting learners, both young and old, with learning new information, by giving them extra attention on a one-on-one basis. Tutoring has been suggested to be one of the most effective ways to help someone learn. (Derry and Potts, 1998). Many studies have shown beneficial effects but for the most part these have been about subject matter instruction such as math or science, using skilled tutors that know about typical "bugs" that learners have. These tutors have methods that help learners overcome their mental problems with the material. The tutoring in library literacy programs uses volunteer tutoring to teach a very big skill, reading. The tutors are not experts in teaching reading and although they do have specific training (the duration and types of training vary with the needs of the community being served and are chosen by the local staff), these do not teach every problem a learner could have and present solutions to help. Derry and Potts (1998) provide evidence to suggest that even tutors who are less skilled in specific subject matter can make a big difference in learners' improvement. Even if tutoring provides excellent help for cognitive skills, we are still left trying to explain how non-literacy changes came about from this intensive attention.

According to Hedegard and Lompcher (1999), learning is more than taking in information and improving skills; the process of learning as an activity is related to psychological development as well. This is more apparent for children who attend school where learning is an activity oriented not only toward reading and math but also the acquisition of social knowledge and skills. However, adults in a learning situation can be affected strongly. For example, in our interviews they report excitement,

hopefulness for the future, desire to change and feelings that their efforts will make a difference. These are all psychological experiences brought about by their literacy activity.

Literacy is, after all, such an all-encompassing activity it is not surprising that many aspects of a person's life are affected by literacy level. Formal literacy skills are related to social power according to Gee (1999). He says that people use their educational achievements to indicate their position in society and membership in particular groups such as having high school degrees and/or college educations. He calls literacy abilities "identity kits" describing them as ways in which we identify ourselves to others like us. There is also a stigma associated with low literacy. Brandt (2001) agrees and presents economic data to show that while knowing how to read enhances economic and political opportunities, not knowing decreases them. She says literacy has become synonymous with full citizenship and participation in society.

Our study attempted to learn about the tutoring sessions and what went on to change the lives of the learners. We were fascinated and mystified about these sessions. In order to analyze information about the sessions, we used data from both learners and tutors. Both of them were asked to describe their tutoring sessions, what went on, what materials and techniques were used and how they knew the learning sessions were working. As we analyzed these data, we could see that tutors talked much more about the activities in the tutoring sessions than did learners. The learners had somewhat vague notions of what went on in the sessions and talked more about personal change and changes for their children. For example, the tutors would usually give extensive lists of activities in the sessions while the learners might say "we practiced reading." We decided that the tutors' statements provided a more complete view of the sessions, so our analyses relied on these.

We were curious how the tutors decided to proceed in their tutoring. As we reported in the Tutor Chapter, we noticed that they talked about what the learner wanted to learn and we noticed that they had some notions about how the learner learned best. The question was asked in this way "Some people learn best by hearing something, others by seeing it, or by "doing," using examples related to their own lives. Do you think your learner has a particular way of learning that s/he prefers?" Results showed that 28% of tutors believed their learners preferred to learn by seeing, 17% by hearing, 13% by hearing and seeing, 7% by seeing and doing and 13% by combined modalities. Furthermore, it seemed that they tried to use this information when deciding how to construct a literacy lesson.

Most of the library literacy programs in California specifically train their volunteer tutors and staff to identify and address specific learning styles while understanding that the use of a variety of styles and methods is key to success. This will be more clear when the learning techniques used are presented next, but it must be mentioned that from our analyses, over 50% of the learning techniques used require multimodal processing. Nevertheless, it looks like the tutors do attempt to informally or formally assess not only the learner's needs but the best way to teach as well.

Data for the question "What techniques do you use with your learner?" were analyzed in order to help answer these questions. The statements tutors gave were first coded using four categories:

1) the number of techniques described by the tutor;
2) whether or not the tutor talked about the learner's individual needs;
3) whether the tutor used a specific method of learning provided by program administrators, and
4) whether the tutor talked about the tutor training and how they used information from it to direct their lesson.

TUTOR TECHNIQUES

Analyses of the transcripts revealed that tutors used a wide range of techniques to help learners achieve their goals. Overall 36 techniques were described, with a mean per tutor of 3.86 methods. Examples of techniques include using a set of books provided by the program; having learners read aloud; giving learners writing exercises; reading newspapers for current events; reading books on the learners' favorite topics; using flash cards, crossword puzzles or games such as scrabble; using phonics instruction; using children's books (to help learner read and also to help them read to their children); and helping learners apply their skills to their own life for filling out applications, reading maps, writing letters and so on. As to whether tutors used a specific book series or program suggested by the tutor training, 40.9% used such a method. Those that did not use a specific program customized their lesson to the learner's specific need by bringing in books, magazines, videos, newspaper articles and other real-life materials. Even those using a specific program or series generally customized their lessons with additional materials related to the learner's life. Some of the tutors (27.2%) spontaneously referred to the tutor training they had received in talking about their tutoring methods. When discussing the techniques they used, 72.2% of the tutors made very specific personal statements about the learner's needs or desires.

In reading the tutor comments about personal needs of their learners, it was decided to pull out particularly interesting statements revealing this special attention. This turned out to be more than a few comments. Of the 115 tutors who gave detailed descriptions about their strategies, 46.9% were considered "particularly interesting," revealing the in-depth knowledge the tutors had of their learners. These comments were not formally coded because they were of such a personal nature and specific to each case, but overall tutors talked about what the learner was trying to achieve, what the learner liked or disliked, and how the literacy lessons were made relevant to the learners' lives.

There was obvious intent to help the learners' set and reach goals and also to help them believe in themselves. Helping learners identify and set personal goals is a core component of volunteer literacy training in California public libraries. Some of the tutors talked about their personal theories of learning and other philosophical issues. But mainly they

talked about the techniques and how they matched learner needs. To us, this was the interesting part – how the tutors figured out ways to connect their learners to relevant material, depending on the learner's goals. One tutor knew her learner was interested in poetry and she said "we look at poetry and talk about it because she has written poetry. She has told me long stories about her family and I have written them down. Now she is writing them down." This shows that the tutor has introduced a technique that had a path to independence for the learner. Other tutors use materials relevant to the learner's everyday lives. "I had her write recipes out for me and I tried to make the dish," said one tutor. Surely, the learner was interested to find out how it turned out which led to more conversations. From the interviews we can see that the sessions engage both tutors and learners in activities that are complex and adult-like. One tutor said "it has been harder to be a tutor than I thought." As another tutor said, "my learner is always asking about things." This puts the tutor into a position of really helping and guiding the learning process. And so many comments suggested that tutors took this role very seriously and thought about it a lot. As a tutor told us "I think about the learner's sensibilities. I do not want to offend." Another said "I try to make it relevant. About her life." We can also see the ability of the tutors to connect to the community news. "We have been following a murder case in the newspaper," said one tutor but there were others who similarly mentioned news cases that they were reading with their learners.

EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Finally, data were analyzed for the question "how do you know whether your methods are effective with the learner?" Of all the comments read, one stood out as a good example of tutor thinking. The tutor said that the one-on-one method provided the tutor with many behavioral cues as to whether the learner understood or not. It was clear that the tutors were using various ways and cues to show learner understanding. The comments fell equally into several categories. Some tutors gave a test in a workbook or gave their own assessment in order to keep the learners motivated and provide feedback to them. Many said they could see improvement because the learners were moving rapidly through the lessons, or that the learner liked the method and said so. Tutors talked quite a bit about how they noticed if the learner tried to apply the knowledge by using it in their own lives or by sharing it with others. Many said that their learners were very motivated and worked hard so the lessons must be working. Finally, some tutors said they could tell if the learner wasn't benefiting because they said they didn't like the method, or they came unprepared, or they procrastinated. It was interesting that several tutors said they had to look for indirect signs of dislike such as procrastination because the learners were often too polite to say they didn't like the lesson.

Our findings have led us to several conclusions. Certainly one of the reasons that tutoring is an effective way to increase literacy is that a personal relationship develops between the tutor and the learner. The tutor verbalized a great deal of care and concern for the learner. This showed

up in the tutor's descriptions of the benefits of participating in the program. It could also be seen prominently in the tutors' detailed descriptions of their learners and their satisfaction in the job the learners are doing. In fact, when asked to describe their learners, tutors provided extensive information about the learners' lives, their families, circumstances, job hopes, frustrations and needs. They also described the warm feelings and respect they had for their learners. Often they mentioned a familial aspect to the relationship or similarities between themselves and their learners.

But is the change due only to the relationship built up between learner and tutor? We have evidence to show that this is not the case. It turns out that learners did not usually have the same tutor for all three years. In some cases, learners changed tutors several times. In fact, only 18 of the original pairs were still together by the third year and when we analyzed answers about tutoring sessions for these pairs we saw high levels of satisfaction. But we also found that learners who had new tutors for the next two years reported being very happy with them as well, and reported they were making progress. This suggests that tutors can provide very personalized lessons to the learner even if they have not been together a long time.

Trained volunteer tutors have much to offer the learners cognitively and emotionally. This is a large part of the equation. As expected, tutors provide motivation for their learners. The library literacy program instructs tutors to be positive, motivating and encouraging. The learners soak up the encouragement. When asked to describe themselves, learners report that they are capable of achieving anything they set their minds to, and furthermore often preface these types of remarks with the statement "my tutor told me…." Learners say their tutors told them they can do it; that they are not going to fail; that they will be successful. This type of motivating relationship is obviously beneficial.

What happens in these literacy lessons is the centerpiece of the program. The learners show a lot of change in personal growth and social connection, and there is little doubt that interaction with the tutor is the driving force. The changes are coming from the activity of learning and the challenges therein. The tutors take great care to construct literacy lessons that will help their learner. The learner translates this into improved literacy as well as personal change. Literacy development and personal involvement are part and parcel of the tutoring experience, one that seems to enrich all participants.