

Tutors

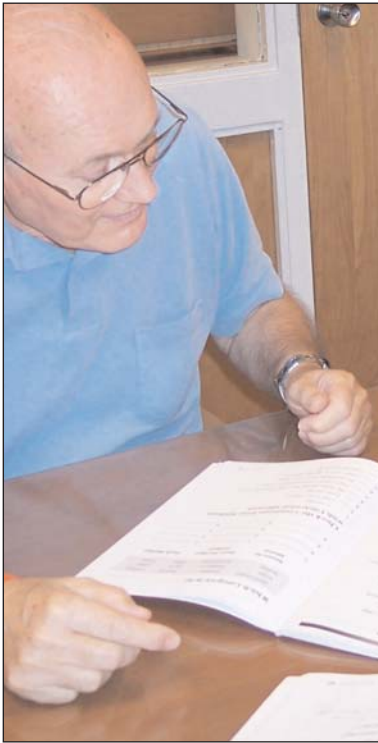


Shirley is a 56 year old woman who had already tutored in a library literacy program for 11 years when we first spoke with her. She has lived all of her life in the Los Angeles area, but has lived in several different cities, both as a child and as an adult. Currently she lives alone with her husband; both of her children are in their 30's and live rather far away. Although she takes great joy in being a grandmother, she rarely sees the grandchildren in person. She was injured in an accident about 20 years earlier and has a mild disability. Shirley is actively involved in several volunteer settings, but has not been employed outside the home in a few years.

Shirley's social network is broad and diverse. It includes numerous relatives, both those who live close and some who live far away. It also includes a large number of friends she has known for various lengths of

time and whom she met in several different settings. In addition to her husband, she describes several people whom she can ask for favors or advice. She also includes friends she has made at the library in her network as well as friends she knows from other places and who encouraged her to start tutoring at the library. She has a busy and active social life with family members and friends alike.

Shirley describes herself as out-going and friendly. She loves kids and loves her cats. She spends a lot of time involved in library functions. When asked about her interests, she says that they are "eclectic." Above all she is an avid reader. She tells a story about being a young adolescent and having her aunt suggesting books that she might enjoy. She would go to the library and check them out and read them. Later the aunt might ask her about them and they would



have discussions about the merits of each. As an adult she discovered that the books her aunt suggested are classics and that by the time she was in college she was extremely well read. Today she reads every thing from *Popular Mechanics* to science fiction.

Shirley became a tutor in the library when her husband was transferred and she “*wanted something to do with my time and it seemed worth while.*” Since then she has “*fallen in love with it.*” Although she has attended all of the family literacy programs at the library, she doesn’t make an effort to attend every literacy meeting. She especially enjoys the science club for children and loves to help them with the crafts and the reading. She is also active in the library’s computer lab.

The meetings Shirley tries never to miss are the tutoring sessions. She currently tutors two learners, one of who is in the Families for Literacy program. She puts a lot of time into helping her learners. She meets with each one for 90 minutes twice a week. She also spends three or four hours a week planning lessons and looking for materials. For her learner in the family literacy program she looks for articles on crafts for preschool because the learner is a preschool teacher as well as a parent.

Shirley also helps her learner find ways to help her children. Initially she had the learner practice reading the children’s books so that she could read them to her children. Shirley has also helped the children directly, with science projects, with homework and with their reading.

In preparing lessons for the tutoring sessions, Shirley uses a variety of techniques. She understands that people learn in different ways and she tries to make use of sight and sound as well as tactile experiences. Although she personally doesn’t care for workbooks, she uses them

Like the learners, the tutors were interviewed for three years whether they continued to tutor or not.

How Many Tutors Were Interviewed?

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
In the program	127	82	49
Not in the program	0	33	38
Total	127	115	87

We started with 127 tutors who had been selected because their learners were included in the study. The tutors themselves were largely middle-aged women, 23 to 89 years old (M = 53.46 years). The overwhelming majority (92.13%) were native English speakers, although 6.30% were Spanish speakers. They were primarily White (73.23%), with 12.60% Hispanic and 4.72% African-American. Most (63.35%) lived with a spouse.

because her learner likes them. She uses phonics for the same reason. Because her learner is shy and lacks confidence, Shirley works directly with her to encourage her to speak up for herself.

She arranged for the learner to give a presentation at a library group and practiced with her to be sure that she had the confidence to do a good job.

We were interested in why Shirley worked so hard at volunteering in the literacy program. She certainly has other demands on her time. First she told us that she, *“loved reading and couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have trouble reading.”* She is sharing something that she is passionate about. In addition she gets *“a warm feeling”* from sharing her learner’s joy at mastering something new. She describes these experiences with her learners in great detail and with great enthusiasm. It is obvious that she is not only very proud of her learners but also very fond of each of them. She has said, *“I get as much out of tutoring as I put into it. I have met a lot of nice people ... and I love doing stuff with the kids.”*

Being open to new experiences and new things is what Shirley believes is necessary to be successful in life. She believes that you have to continue to try new ways of doing things and finding new things to do. One of the benefits she finds to the program is that she is always exposed to new ways of looking at the world and new ways of doing things. In trying to understand each of her learners and to see the world from their unique perspectives, Shirley keeps herself in an environment where she will continue to remain open to new things. For her this defines a successful life. Her tutoring experiences help her to achieve this success.

Although they averaged 1.6 children each, only four of their 170 children were under 17 years of age; most of the tutors had empty nests.

These tutors made a significant investment in the program. They had been tutoring for between one month and eighteen years, with an average of 37.26 months. During that time they had an average of 2.24 learners each. They interacted with their learners on a regular basis, averaging 1.52 times a week, and spent additional time to prepare for their tutoring sessions. Like Shirley, they had made a long-term commitment of several hours a week.

When asked specifically why they had joined the program, the most common responses were either that they had free time (28.6%) or that they wanted to help others (36.1%). Many (19.5%) also expressed strong feelings about the problems of illiteracy in this country, perhaps indicating a particular interest in this field. However, almost as many (18.0%) simply responded to a sign in their local library requesting volunteer help. This suggests a more haphazard selection.



Other reasons for becoming a tutor were more idiosyncratic, and suggest that the tutors were frequently at a transitional point in their lives. Often, like Shirley, they were new to an area, or they were newly retired, or their children had recently left home and they had a newly “empty nest.” One tutor said, “I retired about a year and a half ago and it was time for me to look for some meaningful volunteer work.” Perhaps for some it was a way to continue to be “useful and productive” after the business of child rearing and career were over.

To gain insight into why they stayed in the program, we asked tutors how they had benefited from participation. The most frequent responses were that they enjoyed helping (56.4%), they liked working in the literacy field (48.1%) and that they liked having an impact on the learners’ lives (51.9%). Interestingly, 24.1% mentioned that they valued getting to know their learners.

The tutors were asked to describe themselves. Their self-descriptions were analyzed qualitatively and several common themes emerged. They described themselves as caring, active, happy people with a variety of interests. Many of them were passionate about reading and education. While about half of the tutors described themselves as “out-going” or “extroverted,” the other half described themselves as “quiet” or “introverted.” Thus the program seems to attract volunteers with markedly different motivations. On the one hand, this program attracts those who enjoy working with others. For them the motivation seems to be largely social. For those who describe themselves as “bookish,” on the other hand, the motivation seems to come more from the desire to share something they are passionate about with others.

Tutor self-descriptions, like those of the learners, were also coded into three categories: trait descriptions (“I am short with brown hair”), agency descriptions (self mastery statements such as “I can do anything I set my mind to do”) or relationship statements (“I want to do more to help not just my child but other children too”). The agency and relationship coding scheme came from the work of Mansfield and McAdams (1996) which has already been described in the learner chapter. Tutors made more trait statements than any other kind with an average of 3.65 trait statements in each self-description. Many of them were not simple statements but included elaboration such as “I am quiet but if you ask my husband or children they will tell you there are times when I’ve heard enough and I then I am quite talkative.” They made fewer but frequent relationship statements, averaging 1.21. They wanted to make a contribution to their families and communities and expressed feelings of love and connection to others. They made fewest agency statements ($M = .71$), those related to mastery, achievement and empowerment with an average of only .71.

This close relationship between tutor and learner probably facilitates the educational function of tutoring. However it is the personal aspects of the relationship that are more important to the tutors. Although they are able to describe their learners’ progress, competence, and learning styles, they spend more time describing the learners themselves. The tutors speak positively about their learners and the relationship they share. They refer to the relationship as a friendship and often

liken it to a relationship with younger members of their families. Thus, although the next generation is not actually involved directly in most tutoring sessions, aspects of the impact on their children are very real to the tutors.

The closeness of the relationship gives the tutor access to areas of the learner's life in which help and support are needed. The tutors say that they help their learners with many kinds of problems. They provide suggestions and help for everything from interacting with the school system, to getting a driver's license, to providing rides for dentist appointments. It is the "supporter" role that is stressed in the narratives of our tutors. They believe these activities to be critical to their tutoring. Their narratives make it clear that, for them, teaching adult literacy involves more presenting educational material that is directly relevant to their learners.

When we return to the question of why they volunteer, it seems clear that their stated reasons provide only part of the answer. Their narratives suggest that, for them, the role of supporter may be at least as important as the role of teacher; for they expanded their tutoring activities to include support activities.

Although the tutors are obviously compassionate people who are highly motivated to help their learners, the tutoring sessions were not about therapy or friendship. Tutoring sessions were literacy lessons, carefully designed by the tutors with an individual learner's unique goals and abilities in mind.

Most of the tutors had received training about differences in learning styles and designed lessons to match the preferred style of the learner. Over half of the techniques used during the sessions require multimodal processing. One inventive tutor had her learners make big clay letters and "...use lots of large shoulder movements," in an effort to reinforce lessons.



Learning Styles of Learns

Seeing	28%
Hearing	17%
Hearing and seeing	13%
Seeing and doing	7%
Seeing, hearing and doing	13%

Like Shirley, tutors used a wide range of techniques to help learners achieve their goals. They described 36 different techniques, each tutor averaging 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 by filling out applications, reading maps, writing letters and so on. Some (41%) tutors used a specific book series or program suggested by the tutor training as part

of their tutoring. Those that did not customized their lesson to the learner's specific needs and interests by bringing in books, magazines, videos, newspaper articles and other real-life materials.

When discussing the techniques they used, 72% of the tutors made very specific personal statements about the learners needs or desires and how they hoped the sessions would meet them.

Overall tutors talked about what the learner was trying to achieve, what the learner liked or disliked, and about trying to make the literacy lessons relevant to the learners' lives. As their training had emphasized, there was obvious intent to help the learners set and reach goals and also to help them believe in themselves. Some of the tutors talked about their personal theories of learning and other philosophical issues. But mainly they talked about the techniques they used and how they matched materials and techniques to learner needs.

Tutors also had many ways of determining which methods and techniques were successful. One tutor summed it up: *"I really like the one-on-one method of teaching. You can't get inside a person's mind but you can watch for things that indicate if the person understands."* Clearly, the attention tutors paid to the learners was helpful when it came to assessing progress and improvement in literacy. and because they cared so much for their learners they noticed and took pride in their learners' accomplishments. As Shirley said, "When a learner changes from *"I am too stupid to do this"* to *"I actually can do this"* and then they actually try and that just tickles me so much."