SASKATCHEWAN ACTION RESEARCH NETWORK

PROJECT REPORT

TITLE OF PROJECT: Basic Education Peer Tutoring Initiative Program

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LOCATION(S) OF PROJECT: SIAST Wascana, Regina Saskatchewan

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*highlighting indicates important points
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A. **Question:** Studies on peer-tutoring indicate that significant gains can be made with ABE learners. What is not so clear in the literature is how to effectively match the tutor with the tutee. Instructors need an effective system to identify and match peer tutors with tutees.

   The question under investigation for this study was: "What are the characteristics of the tutor/tutee that will maximize the effectiveness of that learning relationship?" However, also see the results of unintended objectives below...).

B. **OVERVIEW (including outcomes):** This action research project involved 30 tutor/tutee pairings utilizing 110 one-hour tutoring opportunities. Learners were asked to complete session logs. As well, they were given an exit questionnaire and/or interview. Informal observations were also conducted periodically during the project's duration. Data were analyzed and interpreted to discern the significant features, recurring concomitants and critical processes of the tutor/tutee relationships.

   The empirical evidence indicated that tutees were overwhelmingly satisfied; 85+% of the learners rating each subcategory "mostly" or "extremely" satisfied (see below). Three of the thirty tutor/tutee pairings were considered unsuccessful based on either the comments of the tutor or the tutee. In addition, the results illustrate that tutors were overwhelmingly satisfied with the level of support from the project coordinator and referring instructors as well as the level of financial

compensation. Informal conversations with tutors indicated that they felt valued by their tutees as well as the faculty.

Apart from the success of the program, it was concluded that further research could shed more light on the factors affecting BE tutor/tutee relationships. It was felt that this study was able to successfully identify some of the important tutor/tutee characteristics that need to be in place to have a positive impact on adult basic education learners. As of today systemic changes have been made at SIAST Wascana to provide peer tutoring experiences on an on-going basis.

C. Abstract: This project was supported in part by a SIAST "Seed Applied Research Program" (SARP) grant. It focused on adult basic education learners enrolled in the Adult 10, Adult12, and Adult Learning Centre programs at SIAST's Wascana Campus.

The objective was to determine the characteristics of a successful tutor/tutee match, asking: "What makes a successful tutor-tutee match in a SIAST/Wascana BE program where senior students tutor newer students?" However, an unintended outcome was the high level of satisfaction and perceived success of of the project both from the tutors and the tutees. This project has now become part of standard teaching and learning in the SIAST Wascana program.

Characteristically, adult basic education learners frequently display low self-esteem, a lack of confidence, often possess poor problem-solving and coping skills and too often live crisis-oriented lifestyles leading to self-defeating attitudes. Experiencing failure with relationships and employment often appears to lead to drug and alcohol dependency involving not only themselves but also partners or family members. These factors can contribute to poor academic performance as learners. In an attempt to address these issues, current literature on the topic suggests applying retention strategies in academic upgrading and vocational training programs to help adult learners remain in adult programs and develop their educational, vocational and personal potential.

As noted above, the research involved 30 tutor/tutee pairings utilizing 110 one-hour tutoring opportunities. Learners were asked to complete session logs as well as an exit questionnaire and/or interview. Informal observations were conducted periodically during the project's duration. Data was analyzed and interpreted to discern the significant features, recurring concomitants and critical processes of the tutor/tutee relationships.

Based on the collected data, it was concluded that further research could shed more light on the factors affecting BE tutor/tutee relationships. Nevertheless, it was felt that this study was able to successful identify some of the important tutor/tutee characteristics that need to be in place to have a positive impact on adult basic education learners.

D. Significance of This Study

Data from informal observations as well as a final questionnaire were used to provide a broader picture of the effect of *the BE Peer Tutoring Initiative* program.

Although this evaluation project had constraints of time, design and data availability, it was predicted that results obtained could help in promoting a positive atmosphere and create a sense of satisfaction among learners and instructors. As such, peer tutoring could be both reinforcing and motivating for all stakeholders. This evaluation may prove useful in stimulating others to develop and deliver innovative programming that capitalizes on the strengths of ABE learners.

Additionally, this report may help BE managers view similar programs in a positive light and as an integral part of program planning and budgetary process.

E. Objectives & Limitations:

- To discover and document what it is like to participate in a peer tutoring relationship
- To discern and discuss the significant features, recurring concomitants and critical processes of those relationships
- The sample for the study was drawn from one institution and hence the ability to generalize to other programs is limited.
- Data availability limited this study.
- Enrolment in the *BE Peer Tutoring Initiative* was voluntary. Because self-selection occurred in this study it may have lead to bias.

F. Method

This research approach involved 30 different tutor/tutee pairings over three academic terms using 110 individual one hour tutoring sessions. The frequency of successful and unsuccessful (non-persisters) pairings was recorded. Tutors and tutees maintained a session log where they responded to such questions as:

- What did you work on in the session?
- What worked well?
- What's the plan for the next session?

After the sixth session, tutors were required to contact the project coordinator for payment (in the form of $20.00 gift cards) and informal discussion about the pairing. In addition, the project coordinator was available for consultation with either the tutor or the tutee at anytime during the project.

Exit questionnaires were completed by both the tutor and the tutee. This provided both the tutor and the tutee the opportunity to reflect and to think critically on the tutoring experience. No attempt was made to manipulate, control or eliminate situational variables but anecdotal information was recorded in my day book.

G. Findings and Discussion

The exit questionnaire used both focused and direct questions in a semi-structured fashion so that a systematic and selective list of important aspects of the tutor/tutee relationships could be understood. Both structured questions for demographic purposes and open-end and discursive questions for less straightforward topics were employed. Tutors and tutees were asked about their work together, how it compared with previous experiences, and about the use and value of the experience.

Subjective responses of the exit questionnaire were analyzed using an on-line word count: frequency website to determine major themes in learner response. This information was taken as indicative of how learners felt that the program benefited their academic performance. Learners subjectively felt that this program was a worthwhile experience and would recommend the program to their peers.

1.   To discover and document what it is like to participate in a peer tutoring relationship

**Graph 1:   Results of the Learner Level of Satisfaction Survey**
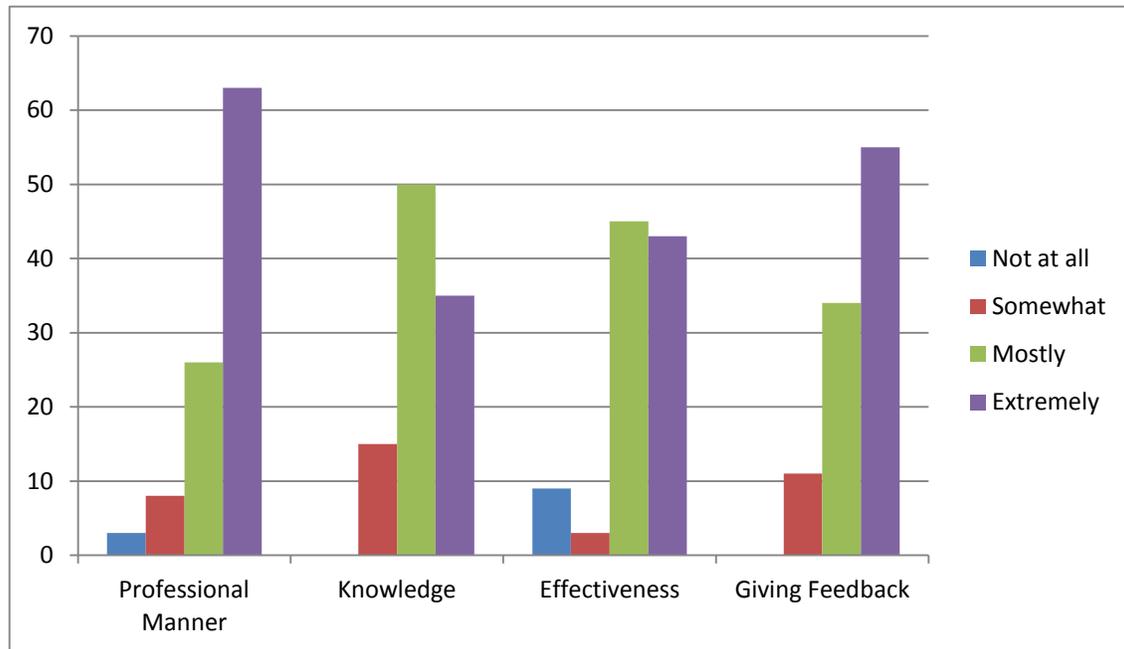
The empirical evidence indicates that tutees were overwhelmingly satisfied with 85+% of the learners rating each subcategory "mostly" or "extremely" satisfied. Three of the thirty tutor/tutee pairings were considered unsuccessful based on either the comments of the tutor or the tutee. In the three situations, the pairings were prematurely terminated as a result of tutor/tutee incompatibility, program/career change and tutor absenteeism from the Basic Education program. These three situations make up the bulk of "not at all satisfied" ratings for each of the categories.

Anecdotal comments seem to substantiate these results as illustrated by such typical comments:

- "Awesome, she helped me in every aspect I asked her to☺"

- "She took the time to explain what I was doing wrong and how I can fix it. As well as explaining what I was doing right and why I was right".

While the program was not without its frustrations, of particular note are the satisfaction levels for the categories of "Tutor Knowledge" and "Tutor Effectiveness". Tutees may have had an unrealistic expectation of the tutors' ability and role. Better preparation of tutees for the tutoring experience must occur if this initiative is to continue as part of the normal Basic Education program at Wascana Campus. Expectations of tutees could be the subject of further study.

Graph 2:   Results of the Tutor Level of Satisfaction Survey
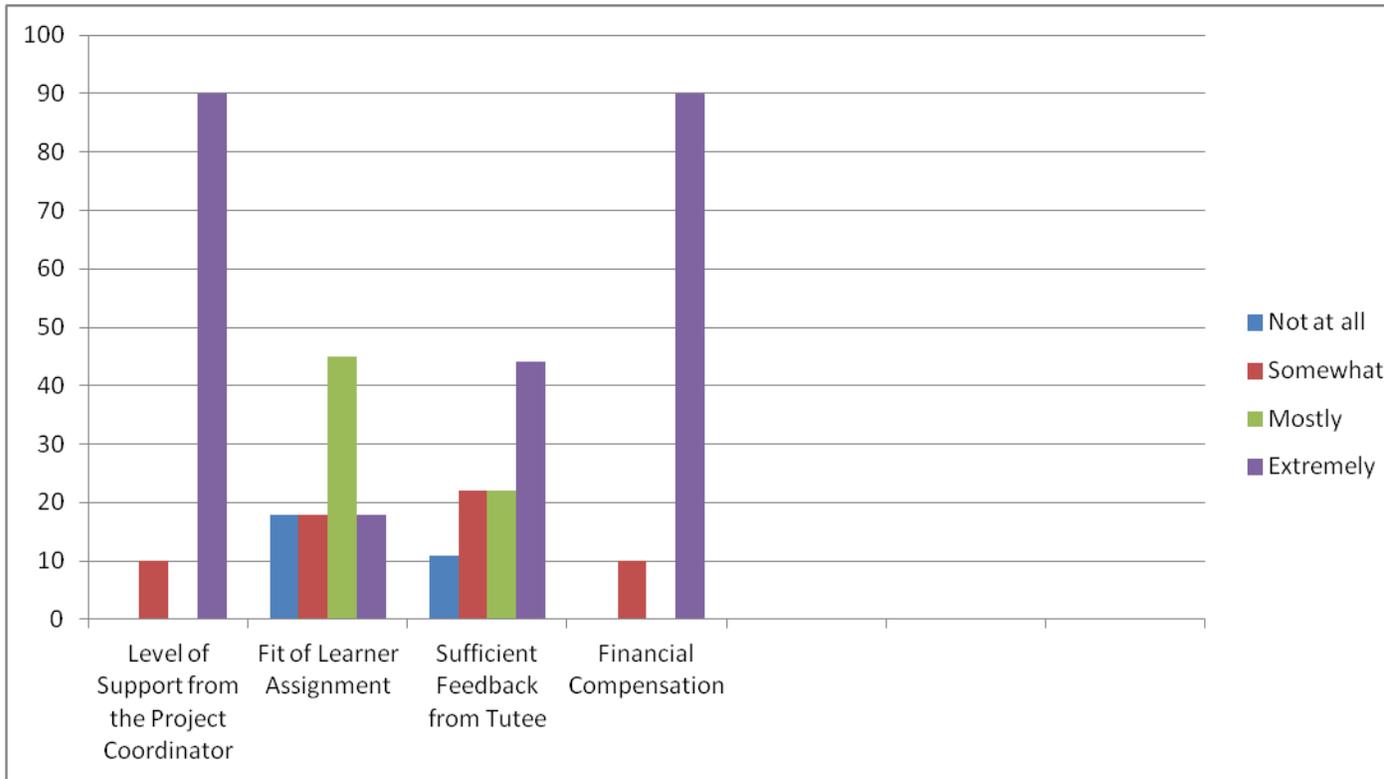
Questions on the rating scale portion of the survey covered the logistical aspects of *the BE Peer Tutoring Initiative* program. The results illustrate that tutors were overwhelmingly satisfied with the level of support from the project coordinator and referring instructors as well as the level of financial compensation. Informal conversations with tutors indicated that they felt valued by their tutees as well as the faculty. This is illustrated by the tutor comment:

- "I was very happy with the experience it has shown me that I cannot limit myself…I feel proud when people ask if I am a tutor. The extra money took the stress off not having food for supper which in turn helped make it less stressful at school."

Interestingly, the level of satisfaction for the two categories of "Fit of Learner Assignment" and "Sufficient Feedback from Tutees" may be attributed to learner expectation and preparedness.

Tutors did not take advantage of the formal tutor training sessions and videos that were offered at the start-up of the program. Time management may have been an issue in regards to tutors availing themselves of the formal training sessions and videos. In hindsight, tutors indicated that they had regretted not taking advantage of the tutor training sessions as exemplified by the following

comment "I found I had no problems although I did not partake in a training session or watch the videos. I'm sure they would help though…" Further study is needed to determine the reluctance to make use of all available resources.

2. To discern and discuss the significant features, recurring concomitants and critical processes of those relationships

Analysis using an on-line word count: frequency website of some of the reoccurring themes indicates that tutees benefited most from the experience if their tutors were flexible, patient, organized, and familiar with the material as well as able to bring different perspectives to the learning situation. When asked, *how was your tutor helpful?* One tutee states that it "Made me feel good about studying. Helped with confidence".

From the tutors' perspective, themes around communication with tutee, instructor and project coordinator, reinforcement of one's own learning, and building confidence figured prominently. Tutors seem to appreciate the importance of their role and took it very seriously as outlined by one tutor who said:

- "I really enjoyed my experience, my tutees gave me as much as I gave them. It was a learning experience for me that I believe that will help me in my future. The time parameters around tutoring made sure I didn't give more than I had and the other rules made sure that the tutoring worked like a well oiled machine with my own workload. I would rate my experience on a scale of 1-10 at least a 9."

Although tutors clearly articulated their thoughts about what makes a "good tutor experience," they seem surprised by the occasional lapse in tutee motivation as exemplified by the following comment:

- "I always have a positive thing to say about the whole experience. I think that the program is very beneficial to both parties involved as I learned new strategies and information throughout the entire process. Along with the positives there is always negative. The student's punctuality and seriousness were always a concern."

It is recommended that tutor training sessions and video as well as project coordinator support could address these concerns.

H. Recommendations for Practice

- Although this particular study does not in itself thoroughly evaluate the *BE peer Tutoring Initiative* program, it could be concluded that it appears to be a useful and positive program. Essentially, there is a need to repeat

this study under different circumstances to more fully establish the validity of the conclusions. It is recommended, therefore, that peer tutoring be implemented and observed in other BE programs and, if possible, the data and outcomes be shared.

- Payment was a clear incentive to the tutors. It is recommended that payment or honoraria be provided to tutors. This project employed gift gift cards. The amount was arbitrary but some financial incentive is recommended for the reasons given above.,

- Although the tutor training program is now well utilized by the student tutors, it is nevertheless recommended that tutors receive some initial training and, to that end, those interested could contact the author for details on tutor training.

I. Recommendations for Further Research:

To effectively evaluate this program, various other measures could be employed. A more thorough evaluation of the program could be implemented by including evaluation measures that include more data on the learners. Some possibilities are as follows:

- Lifestyle while enrolled in the program
- Biographical data
- Sequencing of courses
- Impact of tutoring on group lecture vs. individualized instruction.
- Tutor teaching style
- Measuring instrument, other than Accuplacer, to measure learner performance and focus.

Although this evaluation is not all inclusive, the findings do give some direction in terms of gauging program effectiveness, learner motivation and program planning and delivery.

Studies on peer-tutoring indicate that significant gains can be made for learners with similar profiles to those of ABE learners. What is not so clear in the literature is how to effectively match the tutor with the tutee. Instructors need an effective system to identify and match peer tutors with tutees.

J. A Closing Note:

The impetus for conducting this study was that the Wascana Campus Learning Assistance Program, effective September 1, 2011, no longer provided tutor

support to the BE program. As a result of this study, the infrastructure for a peer tutoring program was established and continues to this day at Wascana.

Finally, Adult Basic Education in Saskatchewan has been experiencing increased financial pressure, particularly in these times of fiscal restraint….demanding that institutions delivering ABE be more productive and accountable in terms of the number of learners who "successfully complete" upgrading programs.

Study data not only legitimizes the claim that improving success in adult upgrading programs requires alteration to the present educational process, but also provides some concrete evidence to support this claim.