

Tutoring Matters: Everything You Always Wanted to Know about How to Tutor

Reviewed by
Romena M. G. Holbert
 Wright State University

Finding effective texts for service-learning courses is a challenging task for academic faculty. A quality text effectively links experiential learning contexts to the academic content of the course. In my service-learning course, beginning teacher candidates learn about the intersections of education and democracy by tutoring P-12 learners in urban school settings. Though several books on tutoring exist, most focus on developing and managing a freelance tutoring business, or supporting college students' study skills or capstone projects. My students struggled with planning tutoring approaches for P-12 learners and navigating the affective, logistic, and academic concerns they encountered in the tutoring context. Until I found *Tutoring Matters: Everything You Always Wanted to Know about How to Tutor* by Tiffani Chin, Jerome Rabow, and Jeimee Estrada, no text offered what my students needed. In this review, I summarize and analyze *Tutoring Matters* to help other faculty evaluate this text as a tool to support students' tutoring effectiveness and content understandings. Incorporation of this text has improved my course by offering tutors guidance that is applicable across grade levels and content areas to enhance the learning of P-12 students.

Title, Central Aims, and Organization

Often, students skim a text attempting to predict how useful it might be. The title, central aims, and structural arrangement of *Tutoring Matters* readily identify the text as a promising and well-organized tool for learning and improving tutoring practice. *Tutoring Matters* is an excellent title for this book, in terms of the multiple meanings of the word "matters." The authors emphasize that tutoring matters because of the potential influences on student confidence, achievement, and autonomy, and "matters," including specific tutoring events and strategies, are also unpacked in the volume. Readers seeking a one-size-fits all recipe for tutoring success may argue that the subtitle "*Everything You Always Wanted to Know about How to Tutor*" is a misrepresentation of the book's scope. However, Chin, Rabow, and Estrada promote reflective dispositions and encourage tutors to utilize students' unique interests, strengths, experiences, and progress to enact differentiated tutoring. The authors make these central aims clear in the introduction:

Because tutoring sessions are so personalized and individual, it is impossible to tell someone "how to tutor." Every student, tutor, and tutoring session is different – and one of the best "rules" you can bring to a tutoring session is to be flexible and willing to change your ideas and strategies every time you begin to tutor. However, there are ways to make tutoring easier, less scary and stressful, and more effective. *Tutoring Matters* aims to show you those strategies and guidelines and help you navigate your tutoring experience. (p. 3)

Each chapter of *Tutoring Matters* follows a consistent structure which intersperses concise yet detailed field notes from tutors along with clear explanations of dispositions and strategies. *Tutoring Matters* is encouraging to the reader. For example, the authors reassure tutors of the normalcy of apprehensions and assert that each reader as tutor “can make an immediate and visible difference in at least one student’s life” (p. 3). By presenting formal tutoring as a natural and interactive process, the authors prompt tutors to build upon everyday experiences. *Tutoring Matters* not only conveys successful tutor actions, but also unpacks mistakes (often described in tutors’ own words), shares lessons learned, and illustrates how resilience contributes to subsequently thriving and impactful tutoring relationships. Each chapter of the second edition also includes “Tip Boxes” which distill key ideas into immediately actionable bullet points. Each chapter ends with “Recommended Readings,” annotated references for in depth exploration of the topics presented.

Six Topical Chapters

At a slim 211 pages, the text is presented in six topical chapters organized chronologically from planning for to ending the tutoring relationship. In chapter 1, titled “Attitudes, Anxieties and Expectations,” authentic concerns such as the natural tendency to like or dislike individual tutees, and preparation for the first session are addressed. Three key attitudes—giving up preliminary generalized expectations, displaying enthusiasm and interest, and feeling empathy, are advanced. These attitudes are then related to behaviors for tutoring effectiveness—demonstrating patience, being observant and asking questions, and interacting as equals—across contexts and backgrounds. In easy to read, conversational terms, the authors urge tutors to delay preliminary goal setting in favor of creating a supportive context for students’ development of positive self-efficacy beliefs.

Chapter 2, titled “Building Relationships,” provides guidance on *how* tutors might make connections, build trust, motivate students, and transcend academic foci to establish appropriate peer-to-peer relationships and set appropriate social boundaries with tutees. The authors effectively use field notes to expand on the idea of abandoning expectations to emphasize how crafting differentiated tutoring interactions that build on tutees’ strengths and interests increases motivation, independence, and appropriate interactions with peers.

Novice tutors will likely look forward to chapter 3, titled “Teaching Techniques.” Chin, Rabow, and Estrada prompt the reader to adapt and apply four key tutoring practices (promoting active learning, higher order thinking, providing choices for students, and engaging students in cooperative and collaborative activities with tutors or peers) to advance students’ learning. Across eleven Tip Boxes, tutors are introduced to multiple approaches including task analysis, use of informal assessment data, adjusting practice, and scaffolding as tools to build student knowledge, reduce stress, and infuse learning with enjoyment. Providing fodder for a wide range of discussions and activities relating to general and content-specific pedagogies, the authors urge readers to “discover many ways to convince your students that they can not only do their work but also enjoy themselves and excel at it” (p. 123).

Chapter 4, titled “Race, Gender, Class and Background Differences,” makes the claim that “... differences in background and culture can themselves contribute to making tutoring relationships rewarding learning experiences for tutors and tutees” (p. 128). Though the chapter addresses a wide range of diversities, the phrasing and choice of examples within the chapter may inadvertently reinforce deficit views of diverse learners and offer limited recognition of the benefits of students’ demographic differences. Seemingly writing for middle class or affluent tutors having first experiences in unfamiliar and economically struggling neighborhoods, the authors instruct tutors to “work around” and “overcome” (p. 128) differences. Faculty may consider using additional readings to help tutors come to value differences as assets to student learning. For example, Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez (1992) offer guidance on recognizing and building on students’ “cultural funds of knowledge”—arrays of resources available to teachers and students which stem from students’ households and communities. Aoki (1993) advances the importance of the “lived curriculum” as experienced by students. Aoki urges transcendence of stereotypes to support positive valuation of individual students’ uniqueness and multiple identities and focuses on how students’ identities are developed or reinforced during interactions with educators.

Within the Tip Boxes, Chin, Rabow, and Estrada clearly articulate the importance of tutor authenticity, attention to safety, and knowing when to seek guidance from partnering leadership. Some of the field notes also evidence tutors coming to understand and confront their own biases. A central concern, however, remains unaddressed within chapter 4—how will tutors from contexts similar to those ascribed to tutees make meaning of this chapter? I would argue that these tutors, and many others, would benefit from a brief introduction to how tutors might process and traverse experiences of microaggressions, systemic racism, classism, or other forms of discrimination in the tutoring context or in interactions surrounding tutoring. Exploration of Delpit’s (1998; 2006a; 2006b) work on connecting to students’ experiences, and teaching “all students the explicit and implicit rules of power as a first step toward a more just society” (1998, p. 280) may support such aims. While most advice advanced is sound, Chapter 4 offers a surprisingly superficial address of race, gender, class and background differences given the authors’ expertise.

Chapter 5, titled “Other Adults: Parents, Teachers, and Administrators,” provides tutors insights into how to deal with common challenges of cultivating and navigating relationships with other adults who influence tutees’ academic achievement and beliefs about themselves as learners. The authors urge tutors to utilize probing and illuminating questions in tactful ways to foster partnership and collaboration with the parents, teachers, administrators, and others they encounter in their roles as guests in established settings. Encouragingly, the authors highlight ways tutors can bolster students’ motivation when dealing with labels placed upon them by others or facing assignments which bore them or offer limited challenge or scaffolding. The field notes and Tip Boxes in chapter 5 provide rich examples of effective interactions and ways to gather and use information to enrich the tutoring experience.

Chapter 6, titled “Good-byes: Ending the Tutoring Relationship,” promises “to guide tutors away from harmful ways of saying good-bye and to help them understand and deal with the difficulties of this process” (p. 187). The authors deliver on this promise providing tutors with multiple ways to “end the relationship honestly and cleanly” (p.187). Chin, Rabow, and Estrada

empathize with tutors experiencing the end of tutoring relationships, stating “ Whether tutors work with individual students, small groups of tutees, or entire classes, bonds develop between students and tutors that prompt a sense of loss at the end of the tutoring period” (p. 187). Foundational guidance for appropriate good-byes includes talking about the relationship and the separation process, focusing on the positive aspects of tutoring, and offering specific encouragement. Articulated behaviors to avoid include making false promises about future interactions, prompting reciprocal gift exchange, and exiting the tutoring relationship on short notice or without saying good-bye. The authors appropriately stress the importance of effective closure as an influence upon tutees’ willingness to engage with future tutors and to grow toward the overarching goal of independence.

Structure and Resources

Tutoring Matters also provides additional resources to the reader. Following chapter 6, the authors include “25 Final Tips to Tutors.” This bulleted restating of key points may be useful as discussion or reflection starters. The authors also include a “To the Reader Section,” in which they advertise the availability of a video of “fly on the wall” tutoring experiences from one of the featured tutors. Given the nominal fee, faculty may consider purchasing this resource to support the concrete theory to practice connections advanced in Tip Boxes. An index of the Tip Boxes would also be a useful resource for the potentially anxious tutor seeking a quick review of key foundational ideas right before a meeting with a tutee. Discussion questions to prompt tutoring readers to consider their knowledge of themselves, their tutees, and how their own experiences may be similar to or different from those presented should be added. This is particularly recommended because most examples and discussion provided focuses on one-on-one tutoring interactions whereas many tutors engage with tutees in pairs or small groups.

Research Base, Perspectives and Theoretical Framing

Tutoring Matters was developed from a sound research base reflecting the tutoring experiences and field notes of over 100 college student tutors over the course of more than 10 years. However, the text is not bias-free. In the Preface to the First edition, included at the beginning of the text, Rabow describes three incidents in his son’s education and states: “This was the beginning of my understanding of the horrors of public education in the United States. Schools tend to standardize all. The rules are unmistakable: you fit in, and you conform” (p.xv). Negative views of public schools and teachers are subtly advanced throughout the text. Though the authors frequently imply limited individualization, differentiation, scaffolding, or relationship-building by classroom teachers, the recommended readings relate tutoring experiences to wider issues and share research and practice which highlights the work of many excellent teachers. Though these recommendations could use some updating, many are foundational works which hold potential to provide the reader with deeper understandings of the issues they encounter within tutoring contexts.

What is missing, however, is a theoretical frame for the book overall. The bibliography of *Tutoring Matters* is simply a compilation of the recommended readings presented across the chapters. Across the chapters, Chin, Rabow, and Estrada emphasize the importance of tutors using their experiences, their contextual surroundings, the encouragement offered through the

text and field notes, and a relaxed and affirming disposition to persevere through potentially challenging and uncertain interactions. Thus, it stands to reason that Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy development is an essential frame which should be discussed in the text. An additional theme which anchors *Tutoring Matters* is the importance of listening to and learning from tutees to maximize a tutors' capacity for making learning meaningful, comprehensible and rewarding. This warrants discussion of Aoki's (1993) work on the importance of educators' focus on lived curriculum which is responsive to individuals and groups of students' lived experiences and interrelationships as opposed to the delivery of a standardized one-size-fits all planned curriculum. Since the text is written to the tutor as reader, and attends significantly to the concerns of novice tutors, theoretical framing may best be provided in the "To the Reader" section at the end of the text to promote comprehensive reflection and scaffolding for further study of psychological and social contributors to effective learning environments.

Significance

Tutoring Matters offers insights beneficial to a broad range of practitioners including tutors, academic faculty of courses with a service-learning or early-field placement co-requisite, and classroom teachers. Novice tutors, similar to those I encounter in my service-learning course, will benefit from the guiding principles and calls to reflection advanced alongside foundational principles for effective tutoring. For seasoned tutors, including those engaged in recurring tutoring cycles in schools or in University peer tutoring contexts, the focus on learning the tutee to cultivate motivation and confidence prior to delving deeply into goal setting for academic learning enhances typical approaches. Faculty will appreciate *Tutoring Matters*' attention to affective concerns because without intentional address of such issues classroom conversations can easily be derailed by student tutors seeking to unpack and develop solutions to the stressors they face in tutoring contexts. Whereas the text addresses key constructs which contribute to teacher candidates' success on high stakes assessments and in subsequent coursework, focus is placed on the intrinsic motivation which comes from experiencing positive impacts on students' learning, confidence, and autonomy. Classroom teachers can also benefit from *Tutoring Matters* because it provides an impetus to begin conversations with tutors and University faculty surrounding what service-learning tutors should know and be able to do. In short, *Tutoring Matters* provides multiple examples, is applicable by tutors across content areas and grade levels, and prompts reflection and differentiation to support learning. *Tutoring Matters*, a low cost and highly accessible text, makes valuable contributions to practitioner capacity for preparing, supporting, and enacting effective tutoring experiences for a wide range of learners.

Author Notes

Romena M.G. Holbert is an Assistant Professor of Foundations of Education at Wright State University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to romena.holbert@wright.edu

References

- Aoki, T. T. (1993). Legitimizing lived curriculum: Towards a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 8(3), 255-268.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change, *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215.
- Chin, T., Rabow, J., & Estrada, J. (2011). *Tutoring matters: Everything you always wanted to know about how to tutor*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 280–298.
- Delpit, L. (2006a). Educators as “seed people” growing a new future. *Educational Researcher*, 7(32), 14–21.
- Delpit, L. (2006b). Lessons from teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 220–231.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.