

Peer Tutoring and Gifted Learners—Applying a Critical Thinking Lens

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Each year, I have the opportunity to work with preservice teachers to provide a little bit of information for them about gifted education. During that workshop, someone always brings up the idea that one great way to work with advanced learners—particularly the teacher pleasers and “fast finishers” among them—is to have them help the other kids with their work. These developing professionals, along with some of the practicing teachers with whom they work, are secure in their belief that this approach is a win for everyone. Students are kept busy, the struggling student has individual support, and surely the gifted learner will benefit because “we all learn something better when we have to teach it to others.”

And yet when this idea comes up with gifted education professionals, their eyes roll and sighs are audible because “it is not a solution to giving both students an appropriate challenge” (Clinkenbeard, 2012, p. 628). Gifted education professionals, gifted students, and parents of gifted students raise their own concerns about this practice and the degree to which it provides benefits for the learners involved. The practice reflects implicit assumptions about educational benefits that are not necessarily well supported, and although some gifted students may enjoy it, others have more negative percep-

tions. At worst, the practice becomes a context in which the gifted learner is an unpaid teacher’s aide.

I have reflected on the distinctions between views on this issue inside and outside the field for a long time. In the past, when I heard this suggestion, I tended to jump on a soapbox to declare why this practice was a bad idea and how unfair it was to the advanced learner. More careful consideration of my own teaching practice, however, has led me away from shaking a reproving finger and more toward an approach that focuses on employing evidence and logic to guide my students’ understanding. Thus, my current approach for responding to this issue is one that employs critical thinking elements to help teachers frame peer tutoring within the larger context of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the classroom: *what are the intended learning outcomes, how do we measure them, and how do we guide students to achieve them?* This article is framed around key questions that are legitimate and important for educators to understand.

Purpose—Intended Learning Outcomes

The first question is one of *purpose*. What are the intended learning outcomes for both learners involved? A note before we delve further into this issue: the practice to be discussed here

is the informal process of having a “fast finisher” or a learner who has already demonstrated understanding help other students in the same class who are struggling with related work. This differs from more systematic approaches to peer tutoring which are generally organized around specific intended academic and/or affective outcomes and include intentional structuring of the tutoring pairs (Powell & Fuchs, 2015). Further, this informal practice is different from small group learning, “think-pair-share,” or other collaborative learning approaches in which peers are working together, because one learner clearly shows greater mastery of the content or skill than the other.

Given the more informal nature of the classroom peer tutoring practice, the intended learning outcome for the tutee may be no different from the intended outcome of the regular curriculum for that learner. The intended learning outcome for the tutor may be less clear. A teacher employing the practice may not have stopped to consider, much less to write down, intended learning outcomes for an advanced learner who is being asked to help peers with a task; the teacher’s focus may more likely be on the needs of the learner who is struggling. Upon consideration of the question, a teacher may indicate that the tutor is going to learn the content more deeply by teaching about it; will learn

something about helping others; or will develop some leadership skills. Once a learning outcome is defined, however, another question immediately follows.

Evidence and Inference— Assessment Strategy

The next legitimate question is one of *evidence*: How is progress toward the learning outcome to be measured? This question is more difficult to answer than the question of purpose. In most cases, teachers are unlikely to have a specific assessment strategy in place for determining progress toward a vague learning outcome of “learning something more deeply by teaching it to someone else.” Once again, assessment for the tutee may be just the original assessment plan in place around the objectives, but for the tutor the question may become more challenging. Further, learning outcomes related to helping others (e.g., empathy; leadership skills) are not necessarily easy to measure, nor are they likely to be a priority for assessment in a busy classroom.

A different question of evidence is the grounding of the practice in research. Peer tutoring has been studied and described in the research literature, and researchers have described positive results related to both academic and affective outcomes (e.g., Harris & Meltzer, 2015; Topping, 2005). However, most of the literature focuses on outcomes for the tutee with fewer studies focused on outcomes for the tutor; and those that do address tutor outcomes are somewhat mixed. Some studies have found positive results related to social and emotional outcomes for students involved in both roles in peer tutoring, including increases in helping behaviors (Topping, 2005). In one study, Park and Oliver (2009) found that science teachers reported positive effects on gifted students serving as peer tutors, though most of those effects were related to understanding their peers, with no documented attention to academic growth gains. Such results are an argument for the use of peer tutoring for social learning purposes, although again the question would be whether those are the intended learning outcomes and how they are assessed. Further, with these and other proposed learning outcomes for the tutor, the question beyond the

purpose and the *evidence of progress* must focus on the supports and experiences students have along the way.

Assumptions about Learning and Implications for Instruction

Between establishing intended learning outcomes and assessing progress, teachers engage in the centerpiece of their work—providing instruction. The profession of teaching is grounded in a central *assumption* that teachers actively engage students in learning activities to move them from one level of skill or understanding to another. Therefore, a key question for a teacher employing a gifted peer tutor is linked to our assumptions about learning and teaching: What instruction is provided to guide the learner toward the intended learning outcomes?

The research literature on peer tutoring demonstrates consistent attention to the issue of *tutor training* as an important component of success in peer tutoring. One of the most extensively reported peer tutoring models, the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) approach, includes specific attention to training for students involved in peer tutoring as tutors and tutees: “With an evidence-based peer-tutoring program like PALS, students are assigned specific roles within the pair and provided with training in how to work productively” (Powell & Fuchs, 2015, p. 189). Several researchers have highlighted that untrained tutors are more likely to “tell” than to teach (Roscoe & Chi, 2007) and that they may be ineffective in error correction and use of feedback (Topping et al., 2012). It is important that teachers consider the difference between building someone’s understanding (knowledge building) and telling them step-by-step exactly what to do (knowledge telling), with little attention to how well those steps are internalized. Roscoe and Chi demonstrated that untrained tutors tended to default toward knowledge-telling behaviors. Thus, employing peer tutoring without training may be limited in its effectiveness for *both* learners in a peer-tutoring pair. In the informal context of employing a gifted learner to help another learner in the classroom, training for the tutor may be limited at best.

Many teachers who employ the prac-

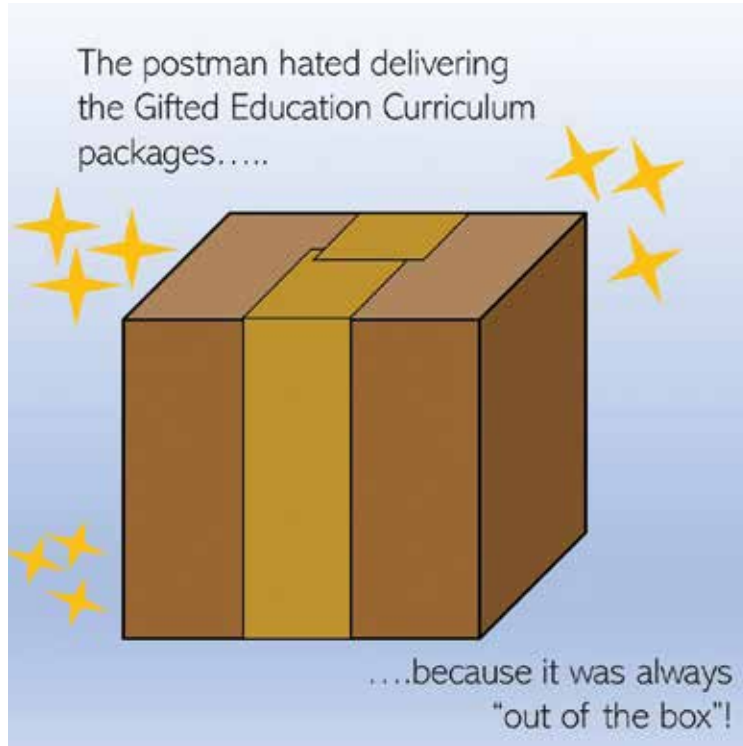
tice of having gifted students help other students are likely doing so in good faith, grounded in the widespread belief that the practice is beneficial to both learners. If pressed, they would be able to identify learning outcomes that are possible (if not originally specified) for both learners in a tutoring pair, and to propose ways that they *could* assess their tutor. Yet rarely are they likely to have provided systematic instructional support for their tutors, and more rarely still will they assess the “deeper learning” they presume to be occurring. Consequently, the practice is not defensible as a purposeful learning experience for the student providing the tutoring—and might not be for the student being tutored either.

Conclusion

I cannot guarantee that all of my preservice teachers have gone on to use peer tutoring only when it is fully grounded in training for the tutor with careful attention to intended outcomes and systematic assessment. Yet I expect that some of them, at least, are more likely to stop and think before using a “help so-and-so” strategy to keep their teacher-pleasing fast finishers busy in the classroom. A classroom-based tutoring strategy may offer learning opportunities for students with a wide range of needs and talents, if certain criteria are met: the evidence underscores the importance of logically questioning the purpose for the practice, the degree of instructional support provided, and the methods used to evaluate the educational value of the approach. The questions presented here are intended to encourage critical thinking about the practice—not to appeal to an emotional response of what is fair or not for the gifted learner, but rather to focus on solid practice of linking intended outcomes, learning activities, and assessment approaches as the basis for classroom experiences for all learners. **THP**

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