



# **VOLUNTEER LITERACY TUTORS**

Taken from Demystifying Adult literacy for Volunteer Tutors by Charlene L. Ball <http://www.nald.ca/Clr/demyst/demyst.htm#table>

## **Why Tutor?**

- allows creativity in learning and communication;
- provides access to professional development through training, in-service workshops, conferences and newsletters;
- promotes personal growth and social functions;
- provides recognition and feedback which build self-esteem (Hladik, 1991: p. 97).

Tutoring also:

- allows for the development of a variety of skills and experience: teaching, interpersonal, communication, organizational, helping and study skills, planning and goal setting, reading, writing and math;
- provides the satisfaction of helping others gain more control in their lives;
- provides the opportunity to help others learn how to help themselves;
- provides a chance to help someone set goals and grow in the process of learning;
- provides a chance to participate in a mutual learning experience;
- offers a chance to have fun while learning a new skill and meeting new people;
- offers access to a group of people who share a common concern for literacy;
- improves community spirit as tutors and learners begin to understand and accept each other;
- allows flexible hours (Winnipeg Core Area Initiative, p. 4) .

***"[As a tutor] you will give support to build a solid, successful learning environment. You will establish a base for improved self-confidence by helping an adult-learner define and reach his or her literacy goals. By helping another human being, you will provide an invaluable gift. Your time and talents will shape another's destiny!" (Baker, p.2)***

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

Volunteer literacy tutors come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and become tutors for many different reasons. They may:

- wish to explore teaching as a new career area;
- need to gain the volunteer experience as a prerequisite for something else;
- feel a need to help people;
- wish to meet other people and make new friends;
- be fulfilling a community service sentence for an offence;
- need to be needed;



- be deeply committed to literacy;
- seek the adventure or challenge of the area;
- need to fill their time.

Whatever your background, and whatever your reasons for tutoring, you are volunteers who give generously of your time, energy and talents. Programs and program coordinators must recognize that your needs must be met if you are to remain committed to the program. (They also have a responsibility to the learners to recognize if someone is unsuitable, for whatever reason, for a tutoring position.)

Likewise, adult literacy programs provide a service which is critical to the lives of many people. These **programs must be able to depend upon their volunteer tutors** to fulfill the commitments they make to the learner(s) and to the program.

The following are some basic assumptions about the roles and responsibilities of program coordinators, volunteer tutors, and adult learners in literacy programs. (Adapted from Watson and Bate, 1991: p.75-76)

#### **What can volunteer tutors reasonably expect of their literacy coordinator?**

- to receive the same consideration and respect given paid employees
- to receive an orientation to the program
- to receive initial training and in-service training
- to receive a volunteer tutor job description
- to receive teaching materials
- to receive information on other training opportunities and literacy events
- to receive guidance and support
- to have access to and regular contact with the coordinator (in person/by phone)
- to have their time well used
- to be involved in planning
- to feel part of a "team"
- to receive feedback on performance (evaluations)
- to be granted some flexibility
- to receive recognition

#### **What can reasonably be expected of volunteer tutors?**

- to attend training sessions, in-service workshops and recognition events
- to attend volunteer tutor meetings and sharing get-togethers
- to plan the course of study with the learner(s)
- to devote some personal time to preparation as required
- to meet regularly with the learner(s)
- to assume the role of tutor/facilitator rather than counselor
- to communicate regularly with the coordinator on learner's progress
- to discuss learner and/or program concerns with the coordinator
- to assist in the planning and evaluation of the program



- to return books/materials
- to make and keep a specific time commitment

### **What can reasonably be expected of adult learners?**

- to give their attention to the lessons during class time
- to attend classes or sessions regularly, as agreed upon at the outset
- to complete homework as agreed upon
- to let the tutor know if they expect to be late, absent or unable to do homework
- to participate in planning the course of study with the tutor
- to let the tutor know when they don't understand something
- to respect the tutors role as a facilitator, not as someone to do the learning for them
- to respect the limits of the tutors responsibilities (ie. they are there to tutor, not to provide counseling, transportation, etc.)

## **Tutor Code of Ethics**

Because tutors place high value on objectivity and integrity in the service they offer, they uphold this Code of Ethics:

- The tutor has chosen to help by teaching literacy skills and keeps that the primary activity of tutoring.
- The tutor displays an attitude of shared adulthood and respect for students.
- The tutor protects the confidence placed in her/him by students. The tutor keeps any personal information offered by a student confidential.
- The tutor is bound to respect the confidentiality of the other tutor-learner relationships.
- The tutor refers a student to appropriate... program personnel when that student requests help beyond the tutor's training, or skills.
- The tutor does not speak on behalf of the... program without prior approval of appropriate... personnel.
- The tutor keeps the commitment of interest and time made to a student and to the program.

(Adapted from Watson and Bate, 1991: p. 82)

## **What makes an effective tutor?**

(Butler, 1990; Colvin and Root, 1987; Winnipeg Core Area Initiative)

In order to be effective, tutors must be able to establish a good relationship with the learner(s) they work with. Tutors must have a commitment to tutoring. They must have time in which to take training, prepare lessons, and meet with the learner. They must also demonstrate certain attitudes, personal qualities, and skills, such as those outlined below. While a tutor may not be expected to have all of these characteristics, the willingness and commitment to develop them is most important.



**Acceptance** - of a person for who and what they are, their past experiences, current circumstances, future dreams.

**Adaptability** - to different ways of doing things, expectations and changing needs and circumstances.

**Belief** - in the person's ability to learn.

**Caring** - the ability to consider the learner, his/her special situation and needs.

**Communication skills** - the ability to explain and demonstrate things clearly so that the learner can understand without additional frustration.

**Commitment** - to make and keep a commitment to the learner, the program and its philosophy and approach.

**Concern** - for the learner's needs, interests, goals and abilities.

**Creativity** - tutors should be creative and eager to try new ways to teach. By experimenting with different teaching techniques, you will avoid becoming repetitious and stale. Because people learn in a variety of ways, it is important to stimulate as many senses as possible.

**Empathy** - the ability to 'put yourself in someone else's shoes', to understand the fear a learner feels.

**Encouragement** - praising each small success and keeping a positive attitude during the learning process helps relieve learner frustration.

**Enthusiasm** - Tutors must be enthusiastic about what they are teaching and about their own and their learners' learning. Your enthusiasm can be infectious and can foster positive attitudes to the subject and to the process of learning itself.

**Flexibility** - to put aside planned lessons in the interests of more immediate needs (ie. helping to make a doctor's appointment, deal with a housing need or any other urgent matter); and is able to teach in more than one way.

**Interest** - in the learner(s), and what they want to learn.

**Listening skills** - show the learner that what they say is important; also helps you to better understand the learner and their needs.

**Non-judgmental** - the ability to listen to and empathize with the learner without making value judgements.

**Openness** - to new ideas and approaches, and to receiving feedback. Learners need to receive sensitive and constructive feedback on their progress. Likewise, tutors must be able to receive feedback from the learner and coordinator in order to grow in their tutoring abilities. They must also be open to learning from the learner.

**Organization** - An organized tutor has a clear understanding of lesson objectives, plans to meet those objectives, carefully prepares the teaching materials needed and arrives early for each lesson.

**Patience** - ability to persevere without becoming frustrated when gains seem small.

**Perseverance** - the learning may seem very slow at times, and many adult learners become frustrated and drop out. Learning - and helping to learn - requires perseverance. Tutors can also become very important role models for adult learners, who may be motivated to continue trying when they see their tutor willing to persevere during difficult times.

**Reliability** - makes a commitment and sticks with it, lets learner know if unable to keep an appointment, reschedules missed appointments, and fulfils responsibilities taken on.

**Respect** - treating adult learners as equals who are learning something new. Genuine respect and regard for your learner's growth are sources of help and pride.



**Sense of humour** - laughter, the sharing of a good joke, cartoon, etc., are good ways to ease tension, to make the time seem shorter, and to make the learning process more enjoyable and less threatening.

**Sensitivity** - Adult learners will often have very fragile feelings regarding their skill levels, and the difficulties they have in learning new material. Be aware of your learners' behaviour at all times, offering clues so that success is always possible. Be prepared to change lesson plans if the learner becomes too discouraged.

**Understanding** - because, for a variety of reasons, lessons don't always go as planned, tutors must be understanding.

**From one tutor to others starting out:**

*"Go slowly. Keep your sense of humour. Throw out any preconceived ideas of how the relationship is going to work, and, most importantly -- take it one day at a time!"* (Thomas, A., 1990.)

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