

Challenging College Students' Assumptions about Community Service Tutoring

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St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

JODI L. BORNSTEIN

Many adults view community service as a wonderful idea that college students should want to do—or be required to do—as part of their education; yet few have asked why students volunteer for community service. Policymakers and education reformers see student involvement as a way for students to give back to their communities while attending higher education institutions. More than 1,700 tutoring or mentoring programs for at-risk youth are currently operating in institutions of higher education across the country (Tierney & Branch, 1992, p. 1).

Many undergraduates enter tutoring without considering how their good intentions may be inherently patronizing. They never question how their taken-for-granted assumptions reflect Eurocentric, middle-class, patriarchal, and racist mainstream academic views. College students' failure to recognize how dynamics of class, race, and gender affect African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos leads to distorted communications between tutors and tutees. This article examines how faculty and student leaders in the TEAMS Project, a community service project at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, challenge tutors' assumptions and promote new understandings about stereotypes, hierarchical group dynamics, and inequality in schools.

THE TEAMS PROJECT

Tutoring Enrichment Assistance Models for Schools (TEAMS) is a nine-year partnership between the Division of Continuing Education and the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with public schools and alternative education programs in Amherst and other local communities. In TEAMS, University students provide in-school and after-school tutoring to linguistically and culturally diverse elementary and secondary school students and adults.

Since 1984, more than 700 college students have tutored over 42,000 hours in nearby schools or alternative educational programs. Tutors come from all over the

campus, representing more than 55 academic departments, including accounting, chemistry, English, engineering, foreign languages, history, management, mathematics, physics, and sociology. About 1 in 5 tutors are education majors and perhaps another 1 in 3 are considering secondary teacher certification.

TEAMS tutors provide one-on-one and small group academic assistance in mathematics, science, social studies, literature, reading and writing. Tutors also help students improve study skills, organize notebooks, and manage the completion of homework and school assignments. TEAMS tutors act as role models for changing attitudes and expectations about college and postsecondary education.

Usually tutors work in school classrooms with students who need assistance and in accord with the teacher's plans. In some schools, tutors are assigned specific students for a semester. In other cases, tutors function as classroom aides, assisting small groups as well as individuals. Some tutors are assigned to a school library or an academic resource center where they interact with many students.

To accomplish these educational goals, tutors use interpersonal skills and strategies that build relationships, including the following:

- Establishing rapport
- Building trust
- Motivating students
- Sharing each other's cultures
- Being a role model
- Appreciating cultural differences
- Understanding and coping with student frustrations.

TEAMS tutors work with students on varied academic tasks in response to their needs, concerns, and background. They include the following:

- Doing homework assignments
- Understanding directions

- Increasing self-confidence
- Working independently
- Thinking critically
- Understanding key ideas
- Expressing themselves in class.

In return, tutors make friends, learn about other cultures and their own, explore possible career options, get course credit, and gain satisfaction from helping others to develop their potential.

TEAMS offers a three-credit seminar to organize tutoring logistics, to help prepare tutors for school and students, to share diverse cultural understandings, to encourage responsibility, to solve any problems as soon as possible, and to reflect on schools as sites for constructing cultural understandings.

The TEAMS project has been recognized locally and nationally as an innovative and highly successful partnership. Last year, TEAMS received a Silver Medal Grand Award for school-college collaboration from CASE (Council for Advancement and Support of Education). In 1991, it won a Distinguished Program Award from the Association for Continuing Higher Education. In 1989 the United States Department of Education awarded TEAMS a two-year Student Literacy Corps Grant. New funding enabled the project to add school sites and double the numbers of students reached by tutors. In 1992-1993, TEAMS received grant support from several area schools, the Nike Foundation in conjunction with the National Foundation for Improvement of Education, and the Massachusetts Community Service Commission.

ASSUMPTIONS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

Each semester we ask students why they have decided to participate in community service tutoring. TEAMS is not a required university course, although students pursuing teacher certification in math, science, social studies and English may use the class to fulfill the State of Massachusetts requirement that new teachers have substantive experience with issues of equity in schools. Comments from tutor applications, mid-term evaluations, and course reaction papers detail some of the expectations of TEAMS tutors. Some tutors start out with focused and technical expectations for TEAMS:

To teach me about all the "isms" and . . . to introduce me to the teaching career, specifically in a culturally diverse setting.

To gain experience working with high school students.

To get an introduction on how to be a teacher by getting some actual teaching experience.

I expected to be more of a teacher's aide—I didn't expect to do much more than pass out homework, etc. However, I did expect to feel more like a "teacher" than I do. The kids seem to see me as one of them which most people say is really good, but sometimes I wish that they were a little more polite.

I would learn the skills I needed to teach in schools.

I expected to be taught how to tutor ESL students.

Other tutors cited their enthusiasm to help others:

To be with the children and help them learn. . . . I want to be a friend yet also someone that can help them with their work.

I expected to tutor people from many different backgrounds than myself. I expected smiles and tears and have gotten both.

That I would be able to work with many different kids often on a one-to-one basis and to really feel that I was helping them out.

Help the students learn and study their work material more efficiently and overcome any learning fears.

To help kids make it in schools that they have a disadvantage in.

Tutors have a lot of enthusiasm to assist others who may not be as "successful" in school. While all of this person power in schools is of great benefit to the students receiving assistance, ignoring many of the assumptions that tutors bring with them to school ignores multiple opportunities to enhance students learning about school structures and social hierarchies.

CHALLENGING TUTORS' ATTITUDES AND ASSUMPTIONS

Once college students start tutoring in schools, their initial enthusiasms are called into question. By comparing their own "realities" of schools to those of their tutees, tutors begin to examine widely shared assumptions about schools and school structures. For example, during their first interactions with students, tutors often notice that their tutees are not excited about learning and completing school assignments. In TEAMS, we discuss why it is that some students are not successful in school. It is not that they are naturally slow learners, or less intelligent than their classmates. Rather these students, who are coming from a variety of diverse backgrounds, find traditional teaching approaches and curriculum materials not relevant to their own lives. Not surprisingly, many tutees show academic gains when tutors make connections between school assignments and student interests. In TEAMS, we discuss with college students how inherent patterns of inequality in school structures put certain groups of children and youth at a disadvantage.

Through a weekly two and one half hour seminar combined with tutoring experiences, The TEAMS Project seeks to challenge assumptions that students bring

with them when they enter the program and begin tutoring in schools. In the first part of the weekly seminar, tutors meet as a site group, (students tutoring at the same school or site) facilitated by their site coordinator, an experienced tutor who acts as the liaison between the school site and the TEAMS project. In this group, tutors have opportunities to share their individual tutoring experiences, resolve problems, and hand in their weekly tutoring logs that document their interactions with students.

After site meetings, tutors participate in group discussions for the remainder of the class. Seminar leaders use a variety of exercises and activities to help tutors examine their own beliefs and clarify their goals as tutors. It is through discussions of race, class, and gender that tutors begin to reassess the values that have been ingrained in them through their own schooling and see how experiences of their tutees may be very different than their own. Usually seminars structure topics around gender, testing and tracking, and racism.

Miseducation: Gender in Schools

To introduce the topic of gender in schools, we ask students to identify three women authors, scientists, mathematicians, and historical figures. Presumably, listing 12 women whose accomplishments are well known should not be difficult. No one successfully identifies 12 women, having the most difficulty identifying women in math and science. Next, tutors analyze English curriculums from their own elementary and secondary schools as well as reflect on books that they read or were read to them at younger ages. After compiling a list of book titles, tutors identify the author, the main character(s), and the roles of women, if they are mentioned, throughout the story. They are astonished to discover that most of their required readings were written by men, with males as the central characters. When women are mentioned or portrayed within the texts, their roles are stereotypical of females or insignificant to the book.

These exercises have a profound impact on the class. Women and men alike are startled by the prevalence of gender bias in formal and informal educational settings. They question whose history they are being taught in schools and how this came to be. Through the examination of the ways in which books, from fairy tales to Shakespeare, foster stereotypes of girls and women, tutors begin to look critically at the school-supported materials they are using with their tutees and often make recommendations for change.

Testing Cultural Boundaries

Each semester TEAMS addresses issues of testing and tracking in schools. For many tutors, the realities of

school structures represent a surprising, even shocking alternative to their own school experiences. Many tutors were in the honors sections of their secondary school courses and they are now caught off guard by the issues facing the students that they are tutoring. A common sentiment among new tutors is that low-tracked learners are slow and are just not trying hard enough. Most schools throughout the United States track students by race, class, language and curriculum. As Jeannie Oakes (1985, p. 7) has stated: "no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group." If tracking helps no one learn, why does it persist?

A "Testing Cultural Boundaries" (or TCB) exercise is given to tutors to open a discussion of how cultural baggage that students bring to school affects their ability to pass any test. The TCB test consists of a series of multiple choice questions taken from a variety of sources, including standard fifth grade social studies exams and tests for cultural awareness. Focusing on experiences and peoples of non-European descent, the questions are very challenging, if not impossible for the tutors. Few undergraduates do well on the test, most fail miserably. Tutors feel dejected and basically ignorant after this experience. As products of White, middle-class, patriarchal education, they do not know names, dates, facts and places about African Americans, Asians, Latinos. They know very little about European-American women and less about women of color. Some tutors take the test independently, some in pairs, and others in groups. From these differing perspectives, dynamics of test taking procedures are also topics for discussion.

In this testing and tracking activity, tutors feel overwhelmed by the questions. As test takers they lack a socio-cultural context for the information and they do not have access to other ways of demonstrating that they know what they know. These feelings lead to discussions about what disadvantaged and educationally cheated students in schools must feel when they take tests that do not give them opportunities to perform well, and then are labeled as low achievers or "at-risk" learners. Tutors begin to look at the situations of their tutees and others in their schools and question the reasons that they are placed in low-tracked classes. The initial blame that tutors placed on students begins to shift towards the examination of school structures that treat some individuals unfairly.

Racism Exercise

In TEAMS, we consistently have difficulty with the topics of race and racism in schools and society. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, beginning with the fact that most members of the class, like most four-year college students, are White. When issues of race and ra-

cism are raised, the first responses of tutors are that they are not and cannot be racist. They tell us that many of their friends are Black, Latino, Asian, and Jewish. True, they add, many of their parents or grandparents may have been racist, but there is nothing they can do about this.

To challenge these assumptions and introduce the idea that race in American society is a "socially constructed (un)reality," TEAMS conducts a self-reflection exercise. Each tutor is asked to write responses to the following statements:

- Describe a time when you acted in a racist way.
- Cite a time when you have witnessed a racist incident and did nothing about it.
- Cite a time when you witnessed a racist incident and did something about it.

Tutors are sometimes hesitant with their writing, yet eventually responses are given. Examples from previous semesters include the following:

When I got on the bus today there was a seat right in front of me where I could sit next to an Asian man, but I chose to walk to the front of the bus and sit next to a White woman.

I am not a racist person but I guess I'm sort of racist to the fact that I won't go out on dates with Black men. I get asked out a lot and I guess many find me to their liking, but if I did my father who unfortunately is prejudice would not hear of it. Also, I don't really find them attractive.

I was at a party and the guys there were making fun of the one Black guy there behind his back. I pretended to ignore them.

I challenged a friend who had been making racial comments and slurs, it ended in a big argument. We rarely talk anymore.

These responses are compiled into one handout and given to the students at the following class. At this session, tutors have time to read over the comments and engage in class discussions about race and racism in schools and society.

From this short exercise, White tutors look at race and racism in their own lives, with their own words. They begin to see racism as an institution that is both promoted and rewarded by the power structure of our country. For tutors, the focus of racism shifts from seeing people of color as victims to seeing White people as oppressors. Tutors begin to look at schools in new ways. For example, tutors see that the diverse student populations in schools are not represented and well served by mainly White teaching staffs.

ENVISIONING MULTICULTURAL SCHOOLS

Two final class activities bring together the overall themes of the course and give students an opportunity

to reflect on their learning throughout the semester. In the first exercise—envisioning multicultural schools—groups of tutors design their vision of an ideal multicultural school and share it with their classmates. In a second activity—constructing multicultural perspectives—individuals confront the questions: "What does multiculturalism mean to you?" "How are schools and other institutions perceived by diverse peoples?" "How can we build mutual accommodation and shared understandings?"

From these activities, we see shifts in students' perceptions about schools. Initially, tutors wanted to go into schools to help students who are having difficulties. By the end of the semester, tutors are looking at ways to re-create schools to foster success among students. The schools they create in the multicultural school exercise depict their newfound understandings of the need for fundamental changes in school structures. The multicultural schools they envision include bilingual classes, teacher populations representative of the student body, alternatives to tracking and testing, leadership opportunities for women, community involvement, and multicultural curriculums.

When we ask tutors to evaluate their experiences in schools and the seminar, nearly everyone reports many positive experiences about tutoring mixed with greater understanding about the difficulties of working in schools.

Initially I thought that tutoring would be an easier task to do. Now I realize a lot more as to what goes into tutoring and how hard it is to teach people of another language and culture.

I have in this class thought critically about my own cultural identity and how that has played a part in shaping me.

Coming from a predominantly white high school, I never scratched the surface of any inquiry into another culture other than my own. The background of those minority students in my high school were simply ignored. . . . I accepted the curriculum and ideas that were taught to me, studied them, and took the tests.

That it would be extremely difficult & intimidating. However, I was looking forward to the challenge & possibility of teaching & interacting & learning.

A few saw the value of breaking free from textbooks and lectures.

I think that it is crucial for universities to have more ties to the community and more of an exchange between the students and the community. I think it is very dangerous to isolate yourself in 4 years of college. There is so much that the community could gain from tapping into the vast number of college students. It is important that the community and the college get along, and even better if they help each other, and right now there is very little community involvement included in a college education.

Teachers need to have a very broad awareness of the WORLD, not just the USA because students are not getting exposed to a world view.

A comment from last semester summed up the vision of community service tutoring as defined by TEAMS:

You can definitely see that there is inequality in the school system. You can see "Eurocentric teaching" in _____ School as evident by the fact that there is no book in the library that presents the true story of Columbus. There definitely is a tutor/tutee exchange as I am learning more from my tutees than they are learning from me.

TEAMS depends on motivated students for community service tutoring in schools. Generally, people have focused on positive feelings generated through outreach efforts to presumably less fortunate others. Students enter community service programs with many taken for granted assumptions. Without opportunities for reassessments, patterns of racism, sexism, and other oppres-

sions will distort their well-intentioned activities. Reflections and dialog engage college tutors in learning about themselves and society.

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Jodi L. Bornstein is pursuing a Master's degree in Social Studies Education in the School of Education of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. She is Project Coordinator for TEAMS. Her areas of specialization include multicultural education, women's studies, and children's writing.