

At VLP's April 28, 2011 Volunteer Appreciation Workshop, VLP tutors discussed six common tutoring questions in small groups. Following are the questions, and YOUR answers and suggestions!

1. "My learner does great when I am teaching something, does all the exercises, and says s/he understands. The next time I see him/her, I have to explain everything all over again. How can help my learner retain/remember new material better?"

Because the nature of the tutoring is not the same as a regular class, which meets more frequently and devotes much more time to the subject(s) being studied, it is absolutely necessary for the learner to do work on their own. The learner needs to be told to do a little studying every day. However, support in the home environment is essential for the learner's success; if this support is absent, the tutor needs to be even more encouraging and supportive. The tutor could help the learner structure this by helping the learner map out what pages/exercises/problems to do on each day between the two sessions.

Some tips:

- Each tutoring session should start out with a review of the previous week's session, including the work they have done on their own between the two sessions. Ask the learner to demonstrate what was learned the week before; ask what the learner remembers from the week before.
- Ask the learner to come up with a list of terms, or a concept summary sheet with examples.
- Have the learner come up with a "cheat sheet" for difficult subjects – like memorizing multiplication tables. Then have the learner tape it to the inside of a magazine, to avoid embarrassment when studying it.
- Be sure to relate the skill they are learning to their daily lives, and be sure they are using it in their daily lives.
- Ask the learner to make his/her own set of flashcards.
- Keep a successful problem or learner product for reference and motivation.
- Keep good examples as illustrations to refer back to when needed.
- Incorporate some "quiet time" into your tutoring session.
- Talk with the learner about what his/her optimum study environment is, and help to think of ways they can create it for themselves. (For example, are they studying with the TV on – and does that help or hurt?)
- Have a theme to structure the material, then take varied approaches to teaching it. For example, use a visual approach for math (like drawing pictures) if it helps the learner, or the calculator to illustrate multiplication tables.

- Consider solving the [math] problem in the learner's native language first. Sometimes interference from the native language gets in the way.
- Use the SQ3R approach: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Reread.
- Give your phone number and/or e-mail address to the learner for questions between sessions.
- Encourage the learner to practice, practice, practice.

2. It seems my learner just wants to learn things for a test. How can I help my learner realize that knowledge is something you build up and keep on building – and that it doesn't end with being able to pass a test?

It's important to get to know the learner, his/her goals, work, the things that are important to them, and what they experience in their daily lives so we as tutors can give meaningful examples of how they can apply what they are learning, and for them to see how building knowledge opens opportunities for them. It is important, however, to honor the fact that the learner is very focused on passing that test for a very good reason, and because it is an immediate goal. Focus on the pertinent material for the test, but help them realize that understanding concepts will be much more helpful than trying to memorize.

Some tips:

- Break down the material into segments to concentrate on.
- Future steps are built upon previous ideas; help the learner understand that knowledge is comprised of building blocks.
- Show how the material being studied relates to their lives. Although some subjects lend themselves to this more easily than others, stress the importance of learning and understanding the concepts and how they can be applied in their daily lives.
- Serve as a role model. Show your enthusiasm for learning and value the examples of those who are true lifelong learners.
- Help the learner realize that it's normal to forget, but that certain things need to be retained in order to move on to the next level. This is a practical reason to learn thoroughly and to remember.
- Immediately give positive reinforcement when the learner shows signs of "getting it" – "IT" being the idea of learning concepts as acquiring the building blocks of lifelong learning. This might be the learner applying new knowledge to their job, their family, their goals, shopping, etc.)
- Point out when the learner answers a question or solves a problem that could only have been done by having other, more basic concepts down.

- Back up when you need to, and go down a level or two to fill in the missing building blocks.
- Stress the importance of reviewing past material in order to be able to move on to the next level.
- Help them to understand that lifelong learning – not just learning for a test – will help them to go further in life, and that will impact not only themselves but also their family.
- Prompt the learner to make necessary connections by asking him/her good questions.
- Make the learning fun.

3. My learner has lofty goals and I'm afraid s/he won't be able to reach them in the near future, like s/he wants to do. I know the VLP specialist has talked with him/her about this, but s/he seems focused on an unrealistic expectation. What can I do to help him/her take one thing at a time, and be more realistic about what can be achieved in a short time frame?

Lofty goals shouldn't be discouraged, but should be balanced with other aspects of the learner's life. Lofty goals can also serve as the learner's main motivation. Most learners' goals are reasonable, but the tutor may have to help them focus on more short-term goals; other learners' goals aren't lofty enough.

Some tips:

- Encourage the learner to focus on the course(s) they are currently taking in order to better manage goals.
- Help the learner understand that rushing through just to be done with a course is not usually helpful.
- Focus on the learner's successes as they relate to the learner's goals.
- It takes a special tutor-learner relationship to see progress at every single meeting. Be explicit with the learner about the time and effort involved in making significant progress toward a goal like passing the GED.
- Involve the VLP Specialist if the learner's goals remain unrealistic.
- Be encouraging, and don't let them give up if they failed to pass a test.

4. My learner started out really motivated, but it seems his/her motivation is starting to wear thin. I know his/her life is really busy, but I want to help him/her keep up that drive that made them come to VLP in the first place. How can I do that?

Perhaps the learner has lost sight of why s/he contacted VLP in the first place. Perhaps the learner is bored with “book learning”, and some real-life activities would be of interest. Perhaps the learner’s support at home is not optimal, or the tutoring schedule might not be working as well as at the beginning, and there could be other logistical problems.

Some tips:

- Have the learner talk in detail about what brought them to their program and/or VLP in the first place.
- Ask the learner to visualize what life will be like after reaching their goal.
- Switch subjects for a while, working on something different, to see if motivation increases.
- Relate the lessons and the homework to something that interests them outside their academic goal. For example, have the learner call some businesses to get costs for some work and then compare them, for perhaps how much more or less (percentage) each would cost. Or, relate the new learning to their hobbies and outside interests.
- Get off the topic a bit and talk about general topics. Chat about last weekend.
- Ask the learner specifically why s/he seems to be losing interest.
- Turn the tables: ask the learner to teach YOU.
- When writing is getting difficult, ask “How would you SAY that?”
- When reading is getting difficult, read to him/her as a kind of a break.
- Change the scene: meet in a different public place, or take a walk.
- Ask if the learner needs to take a break.
- Consider tutoring two learners at one time, so one can keep the other going.
- Discuss the learner’s goals and emphasize the progress to date, asking how the rest can be met.
- Ask the VLP Specialist about using new or different materials.
- Be the cheerleader and provide the “gold stars” when they are needed and deserved.
- Show your own enthusiasm for the tutoring.
- Make it fun.

5. What do I do when my learner doesn’t consistently come to tutoring sessions? The learner wants to learn, but just has trouble organizing his/her life. How can I help him/her acquire some executive skills such as time management and prioritizing?

Miscommunication might occur due to English language difficulties, and schedules are

hard to keep when just kept in the head. It may be that this is not really a good time in the learner's life for tutoring, despite the learner's best intentions, and they can always restart the tutoring later. Perhaps the chemistry between the tutor and the learner aren't right. There are, however, some ways to help the learner organize.

Some tips:

- Print out a calendar with time slots, and put your weekly appointments on it as an example. Explain the value/benefits of utilizing time management skills. Provide real-world examples of prioritization.
- Find out what the learner's work and home schedules are like, without crossing the boundaries of privacy, and help them prioritize based on what is important.
- Both parties should use a calendar. Make sure your learner has one to write in, and help him/her to fill it out for your meetings.
- Remind them of the initial tutor/learner agreement that was signed at the first meeting, and of their responsibilities.
- Decide on an alternate day if the planned day doesn't work out, such as for holidays and library closures.
- Contact the learner between sessions to check in. This helps remind them of their commitment.
- Both parties should call each other in advance of the next meeting, especially to reschedule a meeting. Determine the timeline for this.
- Find out if e-mail is a better option than contact by phone.
- Both parties need to call in advance if there is a cancellation.
- Re-examine your tutoring. Make it more fun. Let them choose what they want to work on.
- If the learner is consistently not keeping appointments, inform the VLP Specialist and let her handle it.

6. Even though my learner comes to every meeting, I never feel s/he is sincere about learning. S/he doesn't do much homework, and never practices English outside our tutoring sessions. I'm not seeing any progress to speak of. What should I do?

Perhaps something has changed in the learner's life that is hindering their study efforts, such as a lack of time. It's possible that a different tutor could help the learner better than you have been able to. The learner might not have a good idea of the timeline involved for achieving goals, thinking the tutoring is open-ended.

Some tips:

- Help the learner develop a realistic schedule to meet his/her goals, using dates. This will help to emphasize that your time with the learner is limited.
- Discuss the learner's goals to find out what is really motivating them, and help the learner develop an outline of these goals.
- Examine if you as the tutor are explaining things effectively.
- Does the learner need more intensive English conversation practice? Where could they get this?
- Make sure they understand how to do the homework, and make sure you aren't assigning too much homework.
- What other resources could the learner be using outside your tutoring sessions, such as online sites?
- Contact the VLP Specialist for ideas and suggestions for your particular learner.