

Literacy Volunteers of Eastern Connecticut Stories of Success

My First Year as a Literacy Tutor

By Literacy Volunteer John Cunningham

I was picking up my books and props as my learners were getting ready to go home at the end of class. "Thank you teacher, thank you teacher," a very beginning learner was saying, it took a few seconds to realize he was talking to me. Once it sunk in that it was me he was addressing, I realized what an honor he was giving me. He was honoring me with the title of teacher and I felt panic. All I could do was stammer out how well he was doing and how bright he was. I don't think I even said "your welcome" and I should have said "please call me John". Of course I should have also recognized that his vocabulary was doing excellent since teacher was not a word we had used in any of his classes. It was a feeling of exhilaration and panic at the same time. How could I live up to the title of teacher? I resolved on the way home that at the next class I would make it clear to everyone that I wanted to be called by my first name.

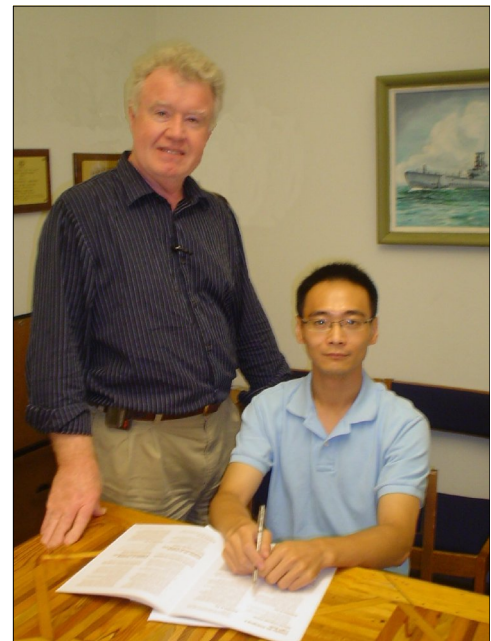
I have been a tutor for less than a year and yet I have learned so much. I panicked when I first heard I was getting a new learner and he knew NO English. Of course I was also anxious when I was assigned my first Learner who was a competent speaker and just needed help writing and reading. As it turned out my Learner with no English was the student that would progress the fastest to the immense satisfaction of both him and I.

I was flattered when an intermediate learner asked me if I could teach her to use a computer and later to tutor her in math.

I wasted too much time on technical grammar items instead of teaching practical English. Was it more important to my learner to recognize a noun from a verb or to be able to understand directions to her daughters school? Adjectives, adverbs, pronouns and prepositions fell by the way side when I realized a learner was struggling with plurals and tenses.

This was brought home to me when the LVEC Executive Director was talking about describing tutor methodology to some prospective volunteers and she summed it up by saying "wing it, let your learner be your guide".

Talking with other more experienced tutors I learned that it is important to stay light on your feet. To stay flexible and be ready to change directions with your learners needs. Learners get jobs or change jobs and now they want to get familiar with medical terms or food terminology or maybe they are cashiering and want to get more familiar with money and math in a hurry. Experienced tutors tell me it is important to my learners to hear me speak so that they may learn my accent. My Trainer had emphasized that it would be important that I hear what my learners are telling me, this came back to me when a particularly shy Learner said emphatically "you must slow down". I recalled what they said about putting yourself in your Learners shoes. My Mentor, Wally, had emphasized not to be afraid to let my training and instincts guide me. As I look back on my limited experience I see that all of this was absolutely correct.



The instructor at my training said that it would take 1.5 to 2 hours to prepare for a session. She was right. And when I tried to shortcut that time my sessions were not satisfactory to me or my learners and I felt guilty. I can occasionally prepare in less time now but often it takes much more. I have multiple learners now, some were assigned to me by the Coordinator, and some were using the Computer Lab and asked if they could join our group. "Our group", well it is flexible from week to week. Anywhere from 2 to 7 learners will show up. It is always a surprise. Like Marvin bringing his sister along to join the group or Agnes bringing her friends Mom. Yes we have to keep the registrations handy. I am sure the office is more than a little wary about "my group", which is technically Small Group Tutoring. The learners are from Peru, Poland, China, Honduras and Columbia. The biggest challenge is preparing each week for the varied levels of competency. Some started out far ahead and some are very aggressive about learning and have advanced very quickly. The very beginners are steered to the Computer Lab, where it is easy to watch over them. But they always want to join the group before the night is over. Generally for the last half hour or so.

This might all sound like a lot of work, and it is. But it is fun too.

The challenge each week of preparing for the unpredictable and having a Lesson Plan(s) that will cover everyone is stimulating. Thank God for the internet because I have found so many worksheets that would have taken me so many hours to develop and type myself. Not to mention the creative ideas from literally hundreds of other tutors and qualified teachers that I find there. New resources at the LVEC office have helped too.

Ah but the real fun is with my Learners. I usually go right from work, on the way I stop at Tim Hortons and get a coffee, for a second wind, and a Danish pastry for supper. As soon as the first Learner shows up I am immediately energized. He or she gets immediate one on one attention. We look at homework and I have to start fielding questions. From then on as others show up it is just a blur of learning, laughter, prodding and teasing – my way of motivating them to try harder or work harder on their homework.

I work as a System Engineer at Millstone, a job that has its own challenges and rewards. But the exhilaration of helping my Learners is something that makes this 54 year old feel young again. I can't really explain why.

When I get home after meeting with my wonderful Learners my biggest challenge is slowing down my adrenalin so I can get to sleep.

I don't know how long it will be like this. I may burn out, my enthusiasm may fade and my wonderment with my Learners my get jaded. But for now I am going to enjoy the ride.

Got a success story to share?

Please send it to:

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