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Peer Teaching in a Learning Centre

Lafontaine Campus of Dawson College is situated near Montreal's "Main" and draws a large number of students from immigrant communities in that area of the city. Low proficiency in the language of instruction is a frequent hindrance to students' general progress in the college. To serve the needs of such a student population, various techniques in PSI and peer teaching have been combined in a teaching service which is directed from a learning centre.¹ The structure and administration of such a system may be of interest to other colleges whose students need extra instruction in academic skills.

The students coming to college from a "New Canadian" community are, in general, highly motivated even though they may still lack the self-discipline necessary to achieve their goals. However, attempts to develop their skills uniformly in elementary courses often destroy this motivation because their skills are not all at a uniform level. Concentration is needed in certain areas for some students but not in others, so not every student who requires additional help is best served by developmental instruction in an elementary course. Moreover, it is difficult to discover all the students who need an elementary course in time to have them register in it at the beginning of term. It is clear that remedial instruction after registration should also be available, yet this raises other difficulties.

A Learning Centre seems to provide an answer to the problems of flexibility raised by remedial learning. However, two general difficulties are encountered in the operation of a learning centre: student motivation and funding. Methods for dealing with each of these have been developed at the Lafontaine Learning Centre and will be discussed in the light of their pedagogical merit.

motivation

Obviously, the key to making the Learning Centre work is to make the student work there. Even in a heavily funded learning centre, one of the greatest problems is to market the service and keep the students coming.² No matter how well motivated initially, students find it difficult to keep going to the Learning Centre if tomorrow, for example, there is a Chemistry exam. Independent Learning Centre courses with a mark and a credit would solve this problem, but they would essentially be just more basic level courses. Another way to sustain motivation has been found. This involves the use of Learning Centre "Units" equivalent to about ten hours of instruction. Teachers throughout the College who find students with difficulties in some aspect of writing, reading, speaking or understanding English are encouraged to prescribe a Learning Centre "Unit" as a necessary part of that student's course work. Teachers are asked to fill in a referral form, and to send the student with it to the Learning Centre. The referral form instructs the teacher to follow the student's progress and to make sure he/she attends regularly. The teacher should also keep in touch with the Learning Centre and speak frequently to the student about his/her progress.

A space is provided on the form for students to fill in their own timetables, so the Learning Centre can schedule a time for them to meet with their tutors — usually for about one hour a week. The form lists appropriate sections to be stressed: *Category A* (for students who have very little background): vocabulary; oral conversation; listening skills; spelling and capitalization; reading comprehension; written expression — verbs, prepositions, articles, sentence patterns; *Category B* (for students who have basic English skills but still need help): reading comprehension (in specified disciplines), spelling and capitalization, writing errors, sentence and paragraph organization. After completing the "Unit," students receive a certificate which they return to their teachers. If more than one teacher refers the same student in a term, the same certificate may be presented to each teacher involved, although students are allowed to do extra work at the Learning Centre if they wish.

Since the "Units" were developed for remedial instruction, teachers are asked not to refer students who are having difficulties only with the content of a course. Units make only limited use of the module concept. They are different from learning packages which students could complete in their problem areas. To be effective, units must offer practice at the frustration level, yet without personal instruction and attention to prerequisite skills, such practice rarely

leads to improvement. Lack of self-confidence and alienation are, moreover, likely to impede the learning of even a simple skill if students feel insecure in a milieu which requires standard English. Because it is so easy for them to become disheartened in remedial learning, the initial resolve to complete the unit has to be carefully nurtured. Motivation is best sustained by an effective program of personal involvement as well as tutoring in the use of English communication skills. The students' home addresses and phone numbers are included on the referral form so that they may be contacted at home to confirm or be reminded of their appointments. This kind of personalized attention can help dissolve the alienation that inhibits learning and that is at least a partial cause of the need for remedial instruction.

funding

But how can a college afford such a system? The service must be provided to the students free. Funds must be found somewhere within the college. The answer at LaFontaine proved to be a group of student tutor-counsellors working with professional tutors and the Learning Centre Staff. This has proved successful elsewhere and in the study, "Student Tutors in a College Remedial Program," an American researcher, Ladessa Yuthas found that "using students as supervisors did not weaken the program and resulted in considerable savings."⁸ In the first few terms of operation at LaFontaine, the student tutors were paid an hourly wage. A number of them agreed, however, that they would be pleased if the time spent counted toward a credit course in their own programs — much as in the system proposed by Gustave Mathieu in his paper "How to Pay Tutors in Personalized Instruction if your Institution does not Provide the Funds."⁴

Based on Mathieu's pedagogic and administrative rationale, another course was proposed and accepted as one of the regular English courses in the College calendar. It is entitled "Tutorial Workshop" and advertised as a course for students who would like to be student tutors and participate in the program of peer teaching at the LaFontaine Learning Centre. One half of the course is spent in class dealing with the techniques of teaching better communication skills; the rest of the time is spent in individual tutorials with students who come to the Learning Centre for help in basic English skills. Depending on the funds available for the program, students may expect to earn a small amount for some of the hours they spend tutoring. They are advised that they do not have to consider themselves experts in order to register in the course, because it is designed to teach them as they teach. It recognizes that the best way to learn is to teach.

"Tutorial Workshop," like a number of courses in career programs, provides students with on-the-job practice. Even for those who do not plan to be teachers, it develops valuable editing skills. The students are well-motivated to learn what is taught in the regular class hours because they know they are going to need to understand it clearly when they teach, even though a professionally qualified teacher is always present for consultation. And when the pupils of the student tutors also benefit, the system has much more to recommend it than economics.

The experience of the LaFontaine Learning Centre confirms the conclusion of Shirleen Schemerhorn's study of "Peer Teaching," that its crucial factor is "its allowance for maximal interaction among students."⁸ The student tutors in many ways are closer to the student tutees than regular staff members could be. When both students are from the same cultural background, as frequently happens, the fluency and competence of the student-tutor is a great inspiration. The system becomes an extension of the Canadian tradition that last year's immigrants help this year's—especially when telephone and personal contacts are maintained in the community. The process not only helps the student being tutored, but also gives the tutor greater confidence and the former's improvement is a reflection of his or her own success. Neither the student-tutors nor the tutees feel, however, that they are working in isolation, for they can always draw on the greater knowledge of the professional tutors, the Learning Centre staff, or the teacher of the "Tutorial Workshop" course. The system as a whole takes advantage of community as the basis of communication, so that students as well as professional teachers can be involved in the learning and teaching of basic language skills.

footnotes

1. For an annotated bibliography on Personalized System of Instruction see Anne Dychtenberg and George L. Geis, "P.S.I. An Annotated Bibliography on an Innovative Teaching Method," *Learning and Development*, McGill University C.L.D., Vol. 5, No. 2 (Oct. 1973), pp. 1-4.
2. Martha J. Maxwell, "Developing a Learning Center: Plans, Problems, and Progress," *Journal of Reading*, No. 18 (1975), pp. 462-469.
3. Ladessa Johnson Yuthas, "Student Tutors in a College Remedial Program," *Journal of Reading*, No. 14 (1971), p. 271.
4. Gustave Bording Mathieu, "How to Pay Tutors in Personalized Instruction If your Institution Does Not Provide the Funds," Paper presented at the Conference of P.S.I., California State University, Long Beach, November 1972.
5. Shirleen Schemerhorn, "Peer Teaching," *Learning and Development*, McGill University C.L.D., Vol. 5, No. 3 (Nov.-Dec. 1973), p. 4.