Peer Observation as a Tool for Self-Reflection

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We all want to have high-quality tutor training: students want to enter the tutoring center knowing that they will receive quality help, tutors want to feel confident that they are providing helpful support to students, and tutor center supervisors want the tutors to have both the math content knowledge and pedagogical skills to support students seeking help. Extensive tutor training can be challenging, both in terms of financial costs and limited human hours to conduct trainings. Formative peer observation is one training tool that can be both efficient and effective.

What are benefits of Formative Peer Observation?
I can hear you thinking, "But how can a peer possibly give helpful feedback? The peer tutor is a novice tutor who is no more experienced than the person they are observing?!" I agree! And that is why the goal in this observation process is for a tutor to reflect on their **own** tutoring practices, rather than to evaluate others. The observation protocols are designed to have a narrow focus on just one dimension of tutoring, with scaffolded prompts to guide the observation process. Thus the purpose of the observation is as much about hearing the ideas of their peers as it is having the opportunity to carefully watch other tutoring interactions and reflect on how that could inform their own approach to tutoring.

> "But as I look at you with my lens, I consider you a mirror. I hope to see myself in you. . . Seeing you allows me to see myself differently and to explore the variables we both use." (Faneslow, 1990, p 184)

Thus, formative peer observation:
- **Stimulates reflection** (Dillon et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2019; Bell, 2001; Cordingley et al., 2005; Cosh, 1999; Reinholz, 2015)
  Tutors are asked to begin with a personal reflection, where they identify where there are at with a particular tutoring practice. After the observation and discussion, they again return to a personal reflection, where they synthesize feedback they received or specific observations that impacted their view of tutoring or future goals.
- **Improves relationships** (Dillon et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2019; Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014; Shortland, 2010; Reinholz, 2017)
  There is an element of vulnerability that comes from opening up one's self to observation and feedback. It is important to acknowledge the vulnerability, establish a relationship of trust between the tutors, and scaffold the interaction to focus on opportunities for reflection and growth.
- **Provides on-going support** (Dillon et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2019; Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010; Martin & Double, 1998)

Unlike a one-off training at the start of the semester, formative peer observation can be a regular practice among tutors, and it does not require additional hours on the part of tutor center supervisors.

What does Formative Peer Observation look like?

The peer observation process has three stages, that we like to think of as a sandwich.
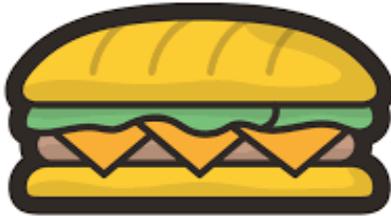
Bread: Pre-observation self-reflection and conversation

Filling: Focused Observation

Bread: Post-observation conversation and self-reflection

- **Bread: Pre-observation self-reflection and conversation**
  Each tutor completes a rubric-based self-evaluation for one dimension of tutoring. The self-evaluation is intended to both help the tutor to reflect as well as to provide concrete ideas for continued improvement. The pre-observation conversation gives the observation pair a chance to check-in with one another about their tutoring goals and struggles, which helps to build collegiality and trust.
- **Filling: Focused Observation**
  The tutor pair takes turns observing one another. While there are MANY dimensions of effective tutoring that can be considered, we focus on just one at a time. So for a whole semester the tutors will work on one dimension of tutoring, and the observation focuses on only that dimension. It means that the observation is easier because the observer focuses on one thing, the feedback is more specific, and the tutor can improve their practice in targeted ways.
- **Bread: Post-observation conversation and self-reflection**
  After both tutors have observed one another, they meet and discuss their observations. The conversation is guided by the post-observation protocol, which includes prompts for compliments as well as targeted areas for improvement. Finally, each tutor independently completes a self-reflection on the dimension of tutoring as well as the observational process.

Sample Observation Protocol
Here is a sample observation protocol that focuses on the tutoring dimension of "Active Listening." I currently have protocols for the following four dimensions (which is a 2-year pedagogy training cycle), but more "fillings" can be developed!
- **Clarity of Instruction** (focuses on pacing, sense-making, and discussing errors or unclear ideas)

- **Active Listening** (focuses on providing opportunities for students to share ideas, using student ideas, and asking follow-up questions)
- **Questioning** (focuses on quantity and quality of tutor questions)
- **Cognitive Demand** (focuses on who leads the conversation and how the tutor encourages deeper reasoning)

Next, each tutor completes the self-reflection, which includes a self-evaluation rubric a brief narrative, and goal-setting (below).

Bread: Pre-observation self-reflection

Active Listening: Self-Assessment		
Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
o I do not have many opportunities to listen to student o I stick to the original plan of how to solve a problem: answering questions does not distract from the problem-solving path o I am often confused by the student and the confusion is unresolved	o I listen to student, and asks clarifying questions when appropriate o I answer student questions, but primarily sticks to solving the problem o I ask questions and follows up if confused about what the student is thinking	o I actively listen to student, providing both verbal and non-verbal feedback, asking follow-up or clarifying questions o I adapt the problem-solving approach based on the contributions and questions of the student o I frequently ask questions and follows up to deeply understand how the student is thinking
Self-reflection: Describe your active listening when tutoring. What parts of active listening are easier for you? When is active listening a challenge?		
Goals: Identify one or two concrete goals regarding active listening you will focus on this semester. The goal should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely.		

The self-evaluation is followed by a pre-observation conversation, that includes the following prompts:

Bread: Pre-observation Conversation

1. What have you been working on when tutoring? How has it been going?
2. Do you have any concerns about tutoring, or the peer tutoring process?

3. Are there any specific things you would like your observation partner to look for?

Filling: Focused Observation
During the observation, the observing tutor has a single-page observation protocol that is specific to the dimension of instruction. The active-listening protocol includes the following tables, as well as space for general comments.

Filling: Observation Protocol focused on Active Listening

1. Who does most of the talking? When?

	Student 100%	Tutor 100%
Start (Problem set-up)		
Middle (Computations)		
End (Reflection/Verification)		

2. How does the tutor respond to students?

	Observed	Not Observed	Comments
Tutor actively encourages student to talk			
Tutor says if the student is correct or incorrect			
Tutor asks follow-up questions to better understand student thinking			
The tutor makes use of student ideas about how to solve the problem			

Bread: Post-Observation Discussion and Reflection

Finally, after both partners have observed one another, they conclude with a protocol-guided discussion. The prompts include the following:

Bread: Post-Observation Discussion

1. My favorite part of your tutoring was …

2. I noted several things about your tutoring style that I wanted to share with you ….

3. I believe that the students you tutored experienced … (put a mark on the graph below for each student or concept you observed.)

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                                    Student Highly
                                    Engaged
                                          │
                                          │
                                          │
                                          │
                                          │
  ────────────────────────────────────────┼────────────────────────────────────────
  Low                                      │                                    High
  Cognitive                                │                               Cognitive
  Demand                                   │                                  Demand
                                          │
                                          │
                                    Student with
                                    Limited
                                    Engagement
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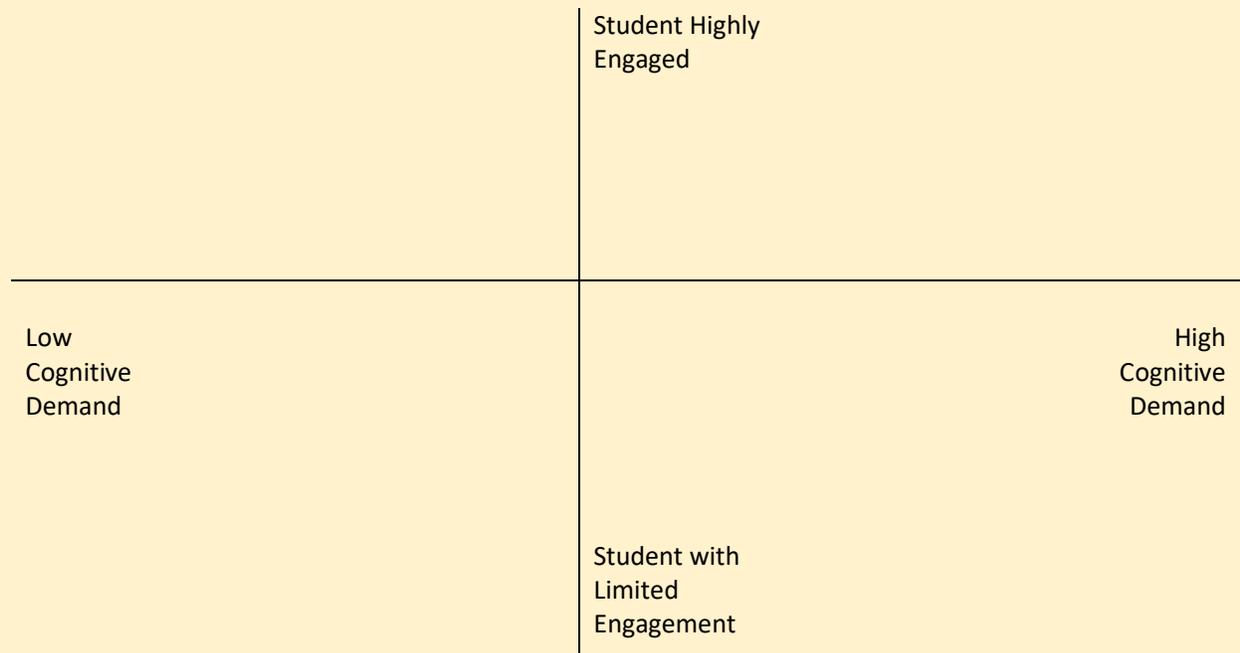
4. If you only want to adjust one thing about your tutoring I might recommend ….

5. Something I learned while watching you that I would like to apply to my own tutoring is…

How do you train tutors for formative peer observation?
I like to combine the peer observation training into more general pedagogical tutor training. Each semester I pick a dimension of instruction to focus on, such as active listening. Rather than discussing that dimension in isolation, I include aspects of peer observation in the conversation about active listening, and give tutors a chance to practice active listening in the context of the peer observation process. The training includes:
- Information on active listening and peer observation
- A "fear walk" in which tutors identify the fears or concerns they have regarding the peer observation process and brainstorm ways to mitigate those fears
- A guided self-reflection on active-listening, which includes the rubric, narrative, and goal-setting
- A sample observation, where tutors work in groups of 3 with one tutor acting as a student, one acting as the tutor, and one acting as an observer, switching roles
- A follow-up conversation in which tutors have a chance to describe the experience

FAQ
- **Will the student mind being observed?** Tutors must gain consent from students before doing the observation, but so far consent has not been an issue at my center. Perhaps because it is another tutor doing the observation, the students seem more relaxed than if the interaction were being recorded or observed by a supervisor.
- **How long should each observation be?** I ask my tutors to observe at least one extended interaction, typically between 10 and 30 minutes.
- **Isn't this a lot of work for the tutors?** To do a good job, it can be a lot of work. The total process includes the 90 minute training (which can have the pre-reflection and conversation built-in), the observation itself (which, depending on the business of the center, can sometimes take place during slow drop-in times), and the 30 minute post-discussion and reflection. I am able to pay my tutors for training, so they are financially supported for this extra time.
- **Won't the tutor act different knowing that they are being observed?** Perhaps, but that isn't a bad thing! If a tutor "puts on a show" by departing from their typical tutoring by doing a great job of active listening for one extended interaction, the tutor still gets benefit from trying out good tutoring practices, and they have a chance to reflect on how that tutoring went compared to their typical tutoring. It can be the motivation a tutor needs to try-out a somewhat uncomfortable practice, and they may be more likely to continue using it in future tutoring.
- **What if tutors are too "polite" and don't offer critical feedback?** This has been a major challenge for my tutors: they don't want to give critical feedback. I've done role-playing in trainings where tutors are required to practice giving critical feedback in productive ways. Ultimately, because the process is grounded in self-reflection, there are benefits even if the tutors don't get strong feedback from their partner.

- **How should I pair tutors together?** I have experimented with pairing tutors many ways. I've formed mentor partners, where each novice tutor is paired with a more experienced mentor. I've placed tutors in the same content specialty together. I've paired based solely on schedule logistics. The best pairings, I have found, are those in which a genuine relationship of trust forms, where the tutor seek one another out for ideas an advice.
- **Can peer observation be done in a virtual environment?** Yes! If your tutor center is doing virtual tutoring, there is no reason why an observation partner couldn't drop into the zoom call with a muted mic and camera.

REFLECT Project Credits

This work is based off of the REFLECT project (Redesigning Education For Learning through Evidence and Collaborative Teaching), an NSF-funded IUSE grant (HER 1710735) that focused on STEM faculty peer observation and adoption of evidence-based pedagogical practices. The peer observation materials developed for tutoring are based off of the materials developed for instructional observation from that project.

If you have any questions about the REFLECT project or peer observation, don't hesitate to reach out to Carolyn James at University of Portland.

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