

### Effective Peer Tutoring: From Principles to Practical Implementation

Keith Topping, Celine Buchs, David Duran, and Hilde Van Keer

Reviewed by Lynda Baloche

*Effective Peer Tutoring* (2017: Routledge) is compact, logical, and user friendly. It is rich in both research and practical implementation strategies. In the Introduction, the authors encourage readers to read the book in stages, reminding them that they can focus on peer learning, cooperative learning, or both. *Effective Peer Tutoring* is organized into four parts: each part begins with an introduction followed by one to three chapters. The clear titles given to each part and chapter, plus the multiple introductions, help readers to both orient themselves and determine their focus. Within each chapter, bullets, tables, and clear introductions and conclusions are utilized effectively to organize the considerable amount of information and detail offered.

In some ways, *Effective Peer Tutoring* is a follow up on *Using Peer Tutoring to Improve Reading Skills: A Practical Guide for Teachers* (2015) by Topping, Duran, and Keer, also published by Routledge. (See review in *IASCE Newsletter 35*[1], pages 3-5.) I found that book to be exciting and was eager to read this second volume. Duran and colleague Ester Miquel also contributed a chapter, "Peer Learning Network: Implementing and sustaining cooperative learning by teacher collaboration" (2017) to the cooperative-learning themed issue of *Journal of Education for Teaching* which was guest edited by IASCE. (See Journal review in *IASCE Newsletter 36*[2] pages 3-4.)

Part I, "Introducing Peer Learning," briefly compares the ideas of cooperative learning (mutual peer interaction) and peer tutoring (directional peer interaction). In Chapter 1, "Mutual peer interactions" the authors define these interactions related to learning, and explain the educational and social relevance of mutual interactions. They examine the principles that promote peer interaction and present characteristics of cooperative and collaborative learning. Their discussion of the "differences" between cooperative and collaborative learning is interesting and insightful. They present examples of cooperative learning models as "pedagogical designs to deliberately promote cooperation" (p. 5) and provide a brief discussion of research evidence that supports the efficacy of cooperative learning.

In Chapter 2, "Peer learning," the authors focus on directional interactions. They discuss such practical issues as role disparity, levels of equality and mutuality, same- and cross-age tutoring, reciprocal tutoring, and a variety of configurations for peer tutoring. They examine effectiveness research for (a) diverse outcomes (cognitive, metacognitive, social, affective, and motivational); and (b) diverse types of students (tutors, tutees, high-need and at-risk students). They examine prerequisites for effective peer tutoring, emphasizing that students must be prepared and continually supported to maximize effective interaction.

Part II, "General Principles for Peer Learning" begins with an introduction that will remind cooperative learning devotees (a) of the emphasis several cooperative-learning models place on the development of interpersonal and small-group learning skills, and (b) that the success of peer learning is contingent on the quality of the interactions amongst students. They specifically mention the importance of summarizing, questioning, explaining, co-construction, argument, reasoning, confrontation, and socio-cognitive conflict. For each type of interaction, the authors present research to support its importance and typically provide concrete examples. They include a helpful chart that outlines the difference between *epistemic conflicts* that focus on a search for understanding and *competitive conflicts* that focus on relative competence. While many teachers seek to avoid classroom conflicts, this chart is a helpful reminder that learning-centered conflicts can be quite valuable within cooperative contexts. The authors conclude their introduction with two brief sections. The first reminds teachers that students are unlikely to engage in promotive interaction without encouragement and structure. I suspect observations that suggest this is true have been based in certain cultural contexts; research suggests that this may not be true for all cultures. Nevertheless, their point is well taken and an important safeguard against the possibility that teachers might be tempted to simply tell students to find a partner and work together. The second section mentions, briefly, the concepts of positive interdependence and individual accountability.

In the introduction to Chapter 3, “Preparing learners for constructive interactions,” the authors restate their premise that students have been socialized in primarily competitive environments and, therefore, their spontaneous interactions are unlikely to be highly cooperative and conducive to learning with peers. They seek to remedy this through careful preparation of a positive framework for interactional learning. They first examine the importance of values, norms, and attitudes and how these might be developed to support cooperation. Their focus on attitudes is an interesting variation on the standard trio of concepts—values, norms, and roles—that are often considered to be the building blocks of group development. They next examine how to help students get to know each other and develop positive interpersonal relationships. Their goal is the establishment of a positive climate for learning where students feel comfortable and can take risks. In both of these sections, the authors provide concise and varied research evidence for their propositions, plus concrete examples and strategies to help practitioners consider what these concepts might look and sound like in their own classrooms. The next two sections of this chapter examine how teachers can help students focus on understanding rather than just ‘getting their work done’ and preparing families for student-to-student cooperation. Then the authors examine how to prepare and teach students to use appropriate cooperative skills. Again, they provide both a concise review of research, plus examples and even a T-chart. In this section, they highlight the skills sets of Forming, Functioning, Formulating, and Fermenting often associated with the Johnsons. The authors emphasize the need for repetitive practice, observation, feedback, and the need to practice a skill in multiple contexts. The authors conclude with a strong section on group processing, again with examples and research. Their presentation of research is particularly compelling and worth repeated reading for practitioners who are tempted to bypass student-to-student reflection on their learning and their interactions.

In Chapter 4, “Organizing peer interactions in academic tasks,” the authors examine, what I like to think of as, “What does the teacher do to plan learning and cooperation?” They review research related to group size, group formation, random vs. intentional grouping, heterogeneity and homogeneity, and student- and teacher-formed groups. They examine positive interdependence and how positive interdependence can be used to focus on both goals and means. They discuss individual accountability and mutual responsibility, linking both back to positive interdependence. In the section “Scripts and scaffolds for peer interaction” they suggest, through concrete examples, the kinds of thinking practitioners need to do when deciding what strategies and/or structures are appropriate for the learning and interactional goals of any particular lesson. They examine four basic types of interactions—dialogue, processing of information, joint construction of knowledge, and problem solving—and briefly describe three established techniques (from among many) for each. They conclude the chapter with discussions of the importance of teacher monitoring and issues related to the evaluation of peer learning. The topics in this chapter will sound familiar to those individuals well-schooled in cooperative learning models and research; this chapter is however well worth reading. The authors do an exemplary job bringing somewhat disparate avenues of research together in their examination of these key concepts and decisions, and use their considerable collective knowledge to bring into sharper focus some established principles.

Part III, “Practical Propositions for the Classroom” begins with an introduction that both reviews the content presented in Parts I and II and outlines the organization and content of the three chapters that follow in Part III. In each of the following three chapters, examples of peer learning are presented to illustrate a variety of implementation practices. The authors describe each example utilizing the following headings: overview of main objectives, grouping students, preparing students and the material, procedure, and evidence from research. This consistency in formatting is helpful when reading and comparing the various examples. In the Introduction they also include a series of tables that provide an overview of the examples in each chapter. Again, this is a worthwhile organizing device for the reader.

In Chapter 5, “Structuring peer interactions in symmetrical relationships (cooperative learning),” the authors present what I assume are examples of their own experiences implementing cooperative learning—in university settings, in school settings using the Johnson and Johnson Controversy model, and in lower-grade mathematics teaching with students who are viewed as low achieving. With each example, the authors provide considerable detail and provide examples of T-charts, responsibility cards—which they use to define specific roles needed for success—and forms that have been used to structure student reflection on their work and interaction. They emphasize that each example does not necessarily emphasize every principle described in Chapters 3 and 4.

In Chapter 6, “Structuring directional peer interactions in same-age tutoring,” the authors present seven examples of same-age tutoring. The examples have been collected from five countries, different educational levels, and

varying subjects. One example is an online reciprocal peer-tutoring project aimed at improving linguistic abilities in Spanish and English. As with the previous chapter, each example includes considerable detail and, when appropriate, helpful flow charts, a bulleted list of effective questions, role cards, student activity sheets, and tables to help the reader organize the considerable information presented.

The final chapter in Part III, Chapter 7, “Structuring directional peer interactions in cross-age tutoring,” presents seven examples of cross-age tutoring. The examples are collected from six countries, different education levels, a variety of subjects, and the examples focus on both cognitive outcomes and on skill development. One example describes an online, asynchronous tutoring program. While this chapter follows a similar pattern of headings described earlier, additional headings are included to emphasize step-by-step procedures, monitoring, feedback, and reflection. The authors conclude with the suggestion that, when developing cross age tutoring, it is advisable to develop a school- or institution-wide shared vision related to the objectives and approaches of the program.

Part IV: “Conclusions and Onward Directions” includes just one chapter, “Advantages, problems, potential and challenges of peer learning.” In this final chapter, the authors synthesize the advantages and benefits of peer tutoring and identify problems and barriers. They offer advice about maximizing benefits and minimizing problems. This chapter is short but not perfunctory. Throughout this chapter, and the book as a whole, the authors’ collective knowledge, understanding, extensive and varied research, and commitment combine to create clear and strong voices. Just as they are proponents of peer learning, the work of each author is supported and augmented by that of fellow authors, plus the hundreds of researchers and writers in their extensive reference section.

To conclude, I will provide excerpts from their final paragraph. It is with these words that I think the authors’ level of understanding about the effective implementation of peer learning and their practical and compassionate approach are most evident.

Yes, peer learning is more complicated than you had realized. But doing anything well always is. However, there is no need to try to absorb . . . [everything] at one sitting, and then enact a perfect . . . project. . . . So start off by trying to implement what seem to you to be some of the most important principles. Observe the effects closely and reflect upon them. Then implement a further project embodying some more of the principles. Go on blending your learning from this book with your learning from what you see in front of you. . . . Try to involve other teachers. Reflect on the projects together and learn from each other. Peer learning . . . [is not just for students]! Progressively, your projects will become better and better as you become more experienced. . . . Eventually much of what now seems complicated will become second nature. (p. 166)

### Reference:

Miquel, E., & Duran, D. (2017). Peer Learning Network: Implementing and sustaining cooperative learning by teacher collaboration. *Journal of Education for Teaching*. doi: 10.1080/02607476.2017.1319509