



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on September 3, 2012

On Teaching and Tutoring (Part 3)

Tutoring is undoubtedly the most effective way of teaching anybody anything. It is the method that has been used since biblical times for fathers to teach their sons. In the Middle Ages nobles hired tutors to teach their heirs long before schooling was invented. Indeed, schooling did not become the dominant mode of education until the industrial revolution when the state got into the education business. In the United States, schooling started in New England with the common schools and private academies. Protestant denominations created schools that have become today's prestigious prep schools for the rich. But because of the egregious failures of American public schools, tutoring is now being used by more and more parents who want their children to get the education they need.



I got involved in tutoring by happenstance. I had become aware of the reading problem back in the early 1960s and realized that schools could no longer be relied on to teach a child to read in the proper phonetic manner. Rudolf Flesch, with his famous book *Why Johnny Can't Read*, published in 1955, made us aware that it was the whole-word method being used in the schools that was the cause of the reading problem.

In 1973 I decided to write a history of the reading problem, *The New Illiterates*, and bring the story up to date. After doing a detailed analysis of the "[Dick and Jane](#)" reading program (the [basal readers](#) written by [William S. Gray](#) and [Zerna Sharp](#) and published by [Scott Foresman](#)), I concluded that the look-say, whole-world method indeed caused reading disability and dyslexia. What parents needed was an easy-to-use phonics program that they could use to teach Johnny and Sally to read at home. So I followed up *The New Illiterates* with a book in which I showed parents how to teach their children the three Rs at home in the traditional manner. Its title was *How to Tutor*. It's been in print since 1973 and has been used by thousands of parents to teach their kids at home.

In that book I told parents and tutors that the most important ingredient in tutoring was patience. I told them to never scold a child if he or she was having difficulty learning what you were teaching. Simply find a better way to advance that knowledge. Also, I advised never to teach anything that later had to be unlearned. That is why I strongly recommended teaching cursive writing first, and print, or manuscript, later. When children learn to write cursive first, they can always learn to print very nicely later on. But if you teach print first, most children will never be able to develop a good cursive handwriting. Why? Because they have to unlearn their bad printing habits in order to be able to write in cursive.

I began tutoring when I lived in South Boston in the 1970s. A U.S. district judge had imposed forced busing on the public schools and many parents in South Boston were reluctant to put their children on



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busses taking them to schools in other communities. So they began looking for tutors, and I made myself available.

The first child I tutored was a 9-year-old girl named Emily. That's not her real name, but I have no idea how to contact her now, 37 years later. But I kept a journal of the experience and here is what I wrote at the beginning of our sessions in October 1975:

First session with Emily O'Mally, 9 yrs old. We covered all the material in the first four lessons in *How to Tutor*. She is learning slowly but thoroughly. She sounds out every letter before she reads the word, as if to be sure of her final response. So she is learning to put the words together on the basis of the letter sounds. Occasionally she will reverse letters because the sequential pattern of letter sounds is not yet automatic. But she does this infrequently. Apparently she had sight-reading instruction in the first grade at the Tuckerman School and the Perry School. She could read dad when she sounded it out in isolation. But in a sentence she read it as father. So even a small amount of whole-word instruction creates habits that have to be unlearned. But this is not the big problem with her.

Five days later I wrote:

Emily is making great progress. It's almost impossible to keep up with her. And her appetite to learn more is insatiable. We spent a full hour and a quarter at phonics with no let up. When I suggest a break, she wants to go on. Today we covered all the consonants in combination with the short "a" and got through short "e." The next session will complete the other short vowels and the consonant digraphs.

We started on writing today. I gave her a writing notebook. She'll have no trouble. She is easy to teach and soaks up everything like a sponge. She'll be an avid reader. Intensive phonics — or alphabetic drill — is the fastest and easiest way to learn to read. It teaches accuracy and precision and is a tremendously effective way to improve pronunciation.

After nine days of tutoring, I wrote the following:

Emily has mastered the short "a" consonant combinations sufficiently so that we can move on to the other four vowel sounds. ... As she learns the other four vowels, her knowledge of the consonants will be reinforced.

She is a careful learner, sounding out each letter before committing herself. Whenever she guesses, she guesses wrong. So she is learning to rely on what she really knows. ... So in nine days she has mastered short "a" and the consonants. Since she is of average intelligence, with no special precocity, that should be a measure of progress we can apply to others.

Several days later I wrote:

The phonics drill is very important, especially when there is conceptual weakness. She lapses into whole word guessing when she is tired and can't think of the letter sound. Basically she is a rote learner and therefore she learns best by drill. The introduction of new vowel letters tends to throw her off her consonants. There is, of course, a normal percentage of error even for an adult. Also, her whole-word guessing habits are difficult to get rid of. She read Ken as Karen. But when I made her sound it out, she pronounced Ken correctly. ... This is only the fifth session. And she is hard at work mastering all of the short vowels.

We have covered the first twenty lessons in *How to Tutor*. That's not bad progress for five sessions.



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It will take a good deal of drill before she is proficient in all that she has been taught until now. By January 1976, after only three months of tutoring, I could write the following:

This was the best session yet with Emily. We covered the long “o” spelling families. We discuss words, and now she is becoming quite linguistic. She is very good at defining words and has a marvelous curiosity about the meaning of new words. She even corrects me. But she paid me the highest compliment by saying that she wants to learn what I want to teach her. She likes the way I teach. My theory was that if knowledge was imparted in a well-organized systematic way, she would respond positively, she would love words, she would love language, because the world of language would be open to her and she would be like Alice in Wonderland because she had the key to intellectual riches and treasures. And this is only the beginning. It was a matter of convincing her that I was not trying to trick her or pull open the trap door.

She is learning to use her mind because I have made it easy to use it. For example, when she saw the word “home” she wanted to say “house” because that is what her teacher told her it was. But I then showed her what house looked like. She uses the slate I bought her to write things out. She also wants to learn cursive writing, because that’s the grown up way.

Her intellectual curiosity is growing. She understands the irregular words and enjoys getting to know them. I show the greatest respect for her intelligence and the results are positive. I give her straightforward answers to her questions. She has become a joy to teach.

Several months later I wrote:

Emily is the brightest star simply because I’ve gotten to her early, before she could be made into a royal mess. Her first year of sight reading left her with enough misconceptions and bad habits. But now she is on the road to proficient reading. ...

Some children require more drill than others. Emily requires a lot of drill because she easily forgets what she has learned unless there is enough drill. If I have learned anything from the present experience it is that there are no shortcuts to sure knowledge even with the best of methods. I have tended to rush her through many different sounds without sufficient drill. So now we shall go back over the same ground, but with greater thoroughness.

By June of 1976 Emily was reading books. She had mastered sufficient phonics skills so that she could improve her reading of English in narrative form, with occasional drills in some of the spelling patterns. Also, at this time Emily’s mother decided that her daughter had had enough of tutoring, and thus ended our sessions. Many years later I ran into Emily on Dorchester Avenue. She was married and wheeling a stroller with a young child. She was happy to see me, and I was glad to see that she was doing well. I could not but help think that I had played a very important part in her life as a tutor. That’s the enduring satisfaction one gets from tutoring a young mind and helping it become a human being’s most precious possession.

Tutoring Emily taught me first, that my methods worked very well. Second, that progress is rarely always in the one direction. You sometimes have to take a step backward in order to take two steps forward. I learned that our schools have created such bad reading habits that the student’s mind is permanently prevented from developing its full intellectual capacity. I learned how difficult it is to undo the damage done by the schools. But I also learned that the damage could be undone through perseverance and hard work on the part of both tutor and pupil. Later, in writing *Alpha-Phonics*, I incorporated all the lessons learned in tutoring Emily and others.



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In my next article I will describe what it was like to tutor a 14-year-old who was convinced that he was dumb and couldn't learn anything, but finally, after intensive tutoring, discovered that he wasn't dumb after all. Tutoring had rescued him from a life leading nowhere to a realization that his life actually had meaning.

(To be continued.)



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