10 Tips on How to Pull Off Peer Teaching

**1. Be sure your tutors are trained.**

Existing research identifies adequate tutor training as an essential component of peer tutoring programs.

One after-school peer tutoring program implemented in a middle school in California, called Student-2-Student, offers tutoring in a variety of subjects to students with the help of high-achieving eighth graders. Student-2-Student is selective in its recruitment of tutors. Qualified eighth graders meeting a minimum GPA requirement and demonstrating high citizenship must complete an application process and obtain approval from their teachers before being paired with struggling students. The program advisor then matches tutors to students based on who seems to be a good match academically and socially. Tutors receive quality training in effective ways to work with their tutees.

This program led to a significant improvement in core subject letter grades for all participants. In an evaluation of the program, participants also demonstrated increased responsibility, completion of homework assignments, and significantly improved work habits.

**2. Use a reward system.**

In another peer teaching program, sixth grade students enrolled in general reading education classes in a Midwestern, urban middle school were assigned to tutoring pairs of either equal ability or pairs in which high-achieving students modeled successful learning with lower-achieving students. Similar to Student-2-Student, the students received training prior to tutoring.

What sets this peer tutoring program apart from common peer tutoring practices is the inclusion of a reward system for students to encourage participation and on-task behavior. During the sessions, the teacher supervised all activities and passed out raffle tickets to students exhibiting good tutoring or on-task behavior. Students wrote their names on earned tickets and placed them in a collection throughout each week. At the end of each week, the teacher would draw several names of students who could each choose a small prize from a box of inexpensive toys.

Evaluation of the class-wide peer tutoring model with rewards for good behavior showed substantial letter grade improvements for the students. The lottery system for reinforcing participation and on-task behavior was show to overcome challenges to student motivation.

**3. Emphasize confidentiality, positive reinforcement, and adequate response time.**

The tutors at Student-2-Student are taught to demonstrate three important things during any given tutoring session: confidentiality, positive reinforcement, and adequate response time when asking questions. The training process also instructed tutors on explaining directions, designing work for extra practice, watching for and correcting mistakes, and providing positive feedback and encouragement.

**4. Choose the learning exercise and the appropriate vehicle for it.**

Simply placing students in groups or pairs and telling them to “work together” is not going to automatically yield results. You must consciously orchestrate the learning exercise and choose the appropriate vehicle for it. Only then will students in fact engage in peer learning and reap the benefits of peer teaching.

**5. Use group strategies:**

To facilitate successful peer learning, teachers may choose from an array of strategies:

* **Buzz Groups:** A large group of students is subdivided into smaller groups of 4–5 students to consider the issues surrounding a problem. After about 20 minutes of discussion, one member of each sub-group presents the findings of the sub-group to the whole group.
* **Affinity Groups:** Groups of 4–5 students are each assigned particular tasks to work on outside of formal contact time. At the next formal meeting with the teacher, the sub-group, or a group representative, presents the sub-group’s findings to the whole tutorial group.
* **Solution and Critic Groups:** One sub-group is assigned a discussion topic for a tutorial and the other groups constitute “critics” who observe, offer comments and evaluate the sub-group’s presentation.
* **“Teach-Write-Discuss”:** At the end of a unit of instruction, students have to answer short questions and justify their answers. After working on the questions individually, students compare their answers with each other’s. A whole-class discussion subsequently examines the array of answers that still seem justifiable and the reasons for their validity.

**6. Use role playing and modeling.**

During the first week of the sixth grade reading program, project staff explained the tutoring procedures and the lottery, modeled each component of the program, and used role-playing to effectively demonstrate ways to praise and correct their peers.

**7. Emphasize the importance of active learning.**

Many institutions of learning now promote instructional methods involving “active” learning that present opportunities for students to formulate their own questions, discuss issues, explain their viewpoints, and engage in cooperative learning by working in teams on problems and projects. Critique sessions, role-play, debates, case studies and integrated projects are other exciting and effective teaching strategies that stir students’ enthusiasm and encourage peer learning.

**8. Teach instructional scaffolding.**

To reap the benefits of peer teaching, tutees must reach a point when they are practicing a new task on their own. Tutors can help prepare students for independent demonstration by providing [instructional scaffolding](https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/teacher-resources/scaffolding-in-education-a-definitive-guide/), a method by which the tutor gradually reduces her influence on a tutee’s comprehension. See our guide on instructional scaffolding here for further explanation.

**9. Explain directive versus nondirective tutoring.**

A tutor who engages in directive tutoring becomes a surrogate teacher, taking the role of an authority and imparting knowledge. The tutor who takes the non-directive approach is more of a facilitator, helping the student draw out the knowledge he already possesses. Under the directive approach, the tutor imparts knowledge on the tutee and explains or tells the tutee what he should think about a given topic. Under the non-directive approach, the tutor draws knowledge out of the tutee, asking open-ended questions to help the student come to his own conclusions about the topic. Both are valid methods, but different levels of each should be used with different students and in different scenarios.

**10. Explain how to provide feedback.**

Positive verbal feedback: Teach your tutors the importance of positive verbal feedback. Prompt students to come up with a list of standard statements which they feel may be positively reinforcing. They also need to be taught how much positive feedback to give. Giving feedback after each and every response can take too much time and diminish its effect. Teach tutors to give genuine praise after every third or fourth correct response and after particularly difficult problems. Make sure to have them practice.

Corrective feedback: Teach your tutors how to respond when an incorrect answer is given. When an incorrect answer is given, the tutor should promptly give and explain the correct answer or draw the correct answer out of the tutee without being critical of the tutee, and then give the tutee an opportunity to repeat the correct answer.

It should be noted that the majority of peer-tutoring programs for students are intended to complement, not substitute for, regular classroom instruction. Tutoring should never be a substitute for professional teaching. An [ideal learning atmosphere](https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/20-things-educators-need-to-know-about-learning-spaces/) is as a rich blend of peer and adult instructional strategies.

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<https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/peer-teaching/>