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The Ideal Tutoring Session: A Look at How We Sit

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Abstract

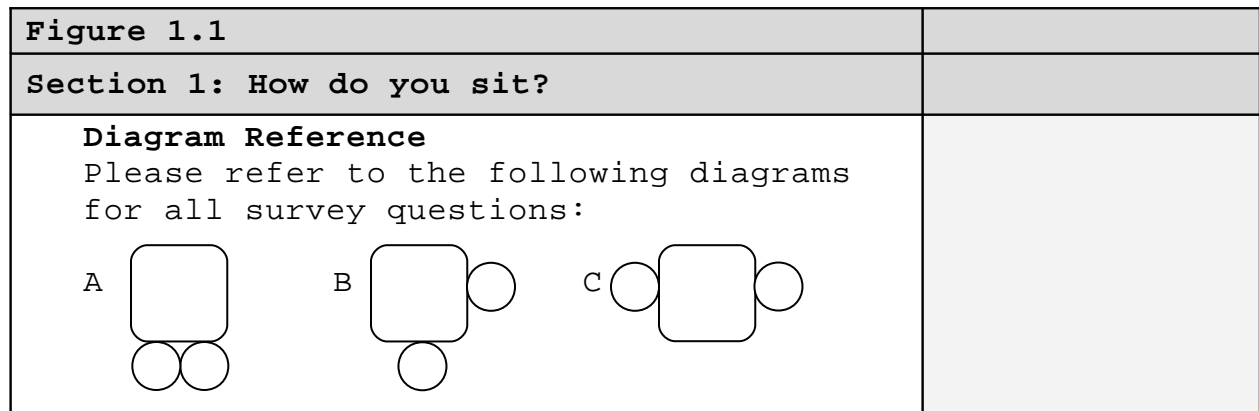
This paper details the results of a study conducted at Bloomsburg University and The College of New Jersey where tutors and tutees were surveyed about their seating preferences during their tutoring session. The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not there is a seating arrangement that is preferred by the majority of tutors and tutees. The results of this study are likely to be beneficial to any professionals that serve in a tutoring environment. Such individuals will potentially be able to use the results of the study to create tutoring sessions that are more comfortable for both the tutors and tutees, in turn creating a more effective tutoring environment.

Introduction

In an effort to enhance the quality of tutoring sessions at Bloomsburg University (BU) Tutorial Services, a search for methods that create an overall superior tutoring environment began. There was however one unanswered question that was not revealed by any tutoring handbook nor any peer reviewed research journals, namely how to sit during a tutoring session. Following this discovery a survey was designed to gather the seating preferences of both tutors and tutees. The aims of the study were to use the results to create improved tutoring sessions for Bloomsburg University Tutorial Services and to make the completed research available to all educators that may find it useful.

Method

The surveys that were developed asked both tutors and tutees what positions they normally sit in, and if there was a preference for a different way to sit. Specifically, whether the students prefer to sit next to, diagonal to or across from their tutor/tutee (See Figure 1.1). The students were also asked which position they would rather sit in if the one they currently used was not preferred. In addition to these items, the survey also included a section in which, the tutors and tutees were encouraged to use to write any reasons for their choice as well as any other thoughts and/or ideas they may have had (See Figure 1.2). The primary researcher also coordinated with a secondary researcher at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) to add an additional sample group. There were two survey's used, one for tutors to fill out about their seating preference and one to be filled out by the tutees about their seating preference. For usable copies of the survey used in the study consult the appendices section of this paper.



1. How do you and your tutor usually sit during your tutoring session?	A	B	C
2. Do you feel comfortable in this position?	Yes		No
3. If not, which positions might you feel more comfortable in?	A	B	C

Figure 1.2
<p>Thoughts/Comments (Please feel free to add any thoughts or comments)</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

The primary researcher was the graduate assistant at Bloomsburg University Tutorial Services and had easy access to the tutors and tutees that were asked to complete the surveys making the sample a convenience sample. The tutors were asked to complete the surveys either before their tutoring session (e.g. while they are waiting for their tutees) or after their tutoring session. The tutees were asked in the same manner and it should be noted that no tutor or tutee was disturbed during his session. The primary researcher was not always present to answer any questions the tutors may have had about the survey, but were made aware that they could contact the researcher by phone or email if a question were to arise. The BU study surveyed 132 students total. Fifty-four of the students surveyed were tutors,

thirteen of them male and forty-one were female. Seventy-eight of the students surveyed were tutees, fifteen of them male and sixty-three of them female.

The secondary researcher was not based out of the TCNJ tutoring center but rather made contact with the center's administrators and arranged for the surveys to be placed in the mailboxes of the tutors with instructions on how to fill out the survey. The secondary researcher was not present to answer any questions the tutors may have had about the survey, but were made aware that they could contact the researcher by phone or email if a question were to arise. The TCNJ study surveyed a total of forty-seven students. Twenty-eight of the students surveyed were tutors, six of them male and twenty-two of them female. Nineteen of the students surveyed were tutees, three of them male and sixteen of them female.

Results

The BU Study

Twelve of the thirteen male tutors surveyed reported that seating position A was the position they sat in with their tutees and that this worked well for them. Six of twelve tutors who wrote in a comment and preferred position A indicated that the primary reason for their choice was because it better accommodated the need for both the tutor and tutee to use the text book during the session. Five of the tutors who wrote in a comment and preferred position A indicated that sitting in that position made the session feel more informal and in turn, made the session more comfortable for both the tutor and tutee. One out of the thirteen male tutors surveyed indicated that position C was the preferred seating position. This tutor explained in the comments section that he preferred position C because he sees making eye contact with the tutee as very important and also because he utilizes the chalkboard that the tutees would need to be looking directly at to see.

Thirty-nine of the forty-one female tutors that were surveyed reported that position A was the position they sat in with their tutees and that this worked well for them. Twelve of the twenty-five female tutors that wrote in comments explained that position A was crucial for reading from the book and seven of the twenty-five wrote in that position A was better for

working on problems together with their tutees. Six of the twenty-five female tutors recorded that position A was better for them because it allows for a more informal and comfortable tutoring session. Two of the forty-one female tutors that were surveyed selected position B as being the superior position on the grounds that it maintains each individual's personal space yet still allows easy access to the textbook.

Fourteen of the fifteen male tutees that were asked to complete the survey indicated that position A was the seating arrangement they used and that they did in fact feel comfortable with this arrangement. One of the fifteen male tutees surveyed indicated that he and his tutor sit in arrangement C and that this worked well. None of the fifteen male tutees surveyed provided any comments regarding their seating arrangements.

Fifty-one of the sixty-three female tutees that were surveyed about their seating preferences reported that position A was superior. One of the fifty-one female tutees commented that position A was better for referring to the textbook together. Three of the sixty-three female tutees reported that arrangement B was preferred and six of the sixty-three tutees reported that arrangement C was preferred. Two of the sixty-three tutees surveyed reported that they used arrangements A and B interchangeably and one of the sixty-three surveyed explained that he used A and C interchangeably.

Figure 1.3	
<i>Tutor/Tutee and Male/Female Breakdown</i>	
Bloomsburg University Study: 132 Students Total Surveyed	
Tutors: 54	Tutees: 78
Male Tutors: 13	Male Tutees: 15
Female Tutors: 41	Female Tutees: 63

Figure 1.4	
<i>Preference Breakdown: General</i>	
Bloomsburg University Study: 132 Students Total Surveyed	
Position A: 116	Position A & B Equally: 2
Position B: 5	Position A & C Equally: 1
Position C: 8	

The TCNJ Study

In the TCNJ study, three of the six male tutors surveyed recorded a preference towards seating position A and three of the six recorded that B was preferred. One of the three tutors that preferred position B explained that arrangement B provided sufficient personal space yet still allowed both the tutor and tutee easy access to the textbook. One of the three tutors that indicated a preference for arrangement B explained that both he and his tutee felt more comfortable and that the session felt pleasantly informal. None of the six male tutors surveyed selected seating arrangement C as being superior.

Eleven of the twenty-three female tutors that took the seating preference study indicated that position A better suited their needs. One of the eleven female tutors explained that her

tutee had an ongoing project using their laptop and this made it necessary to sit side by side as in arrangement A. Two of the eleven female tutors indicated that A was superior because it allowed the tutor and tutee to both see the textbook with ease. However, one of the two tutors that preferred position A because of the use of the textbook reported that she felt awkward sitting so close to her tutee. Twelve of the twenty-three female tutors reported a preference towards arrangement B. Three of those twelve tutors attributed their preference to needing to see the textbook easily. Two of the twelve tutors that selected B explained that position A was too far away and could potentially come off as demeaning while A is too close and breach of personal space. None of the twenty-three female tutors reported a preference towards arrangement C.

One of the three male tutees that were surveyed in the TCNJ study indicated that he regularly sat in position A during his tutoring session and that he is comfortable sitting in that position. Two of the three male tutees surveyed reported a preference towards arrangement B. None of the three male tutees wrote in comments about their particular seating arrangement.

Nine of the fifteen female tutees that were surveyed indicated that they regularly sit in position A and that position A was a comfortable one. One of the nine females that preferred arrangement A attributed her preference to the

increased personal connection that is made between the tutor and tutee in position A while another one of the nine females said it was because of the need to see the text book. Six of the fifteen female tutees reported a preference towards position B and one of the six females explained that she and her tutor review the tutee's papers often and that position B was best in this instance. None of the female tutees selected position C as being preferred.

Figure 1.5	
The College of New Jersey Study: 47 Students Total Surveyed	
Tutors: 28	Tutees: 19
Male Tutors: 6	Male Tutees: 3
Female Tutors: 23	Female Tutees: 15

Figure 1.6	
Preference Breakdown: General	
The College of New Jersey Study: 47 Students Total Surveyed	
Position A: 24	
Position B: 23	
Position C: 0	

Discussion

BU Tutor Preferences

As can be seen in Figure 1.4 position A was selected as the preferred seating arrangement by 116 of the total 132 students. Thirty-six of the fifty-four tutors who filled out the survey wrote in comments explaining why they selected position A. Nineteen recorded that the primary reason was that both the tutor and tutee need to read the textbook and/or notebook during their session. BU Tutor 2 describes this in his/her additional comments section by explaining that:

Sitting in option A and sitting right next to one another is the best way [to] read the book with the tutee and read or do problems from the textbook. It also helps because it feels like you are working through problems with the tutee rather than sitting across from them and teaching like professors do. It gives tutees a sense of ease.

Eight explained that sitting directly next to each other creates an informal environment during the tutoring session that makes the tutee more comfortable and better able to retain material. They also explained that the informal session created a sense of equality between tutor and tutee. BU Tutor 1 wrote the following in the additional comments section when referring to his/her preference towards seating position A:

I try to arrange this seating unless my tutee would prefer

another position (which has never happened). I feel this gives us a feeling of equality, a foreword goal oriented approach to the material - we can read side by side (etc.). There is a close physical proximity and focus on the material - and no distraction or nervousness and gawking at each other or "power play," or trying to read facial expressions in which direct gazes can be used for emphasis - just listening, talking, and reading/writing.

Five attributed the preference toward seating position A to the fact that it is easier to hear one another. Those tutors explained that during peak tutoring hours the tutoring facilities can become very loud. Four tutors wrote that sitting directly next to their tutee made it much easier to hold their tutees attention.

As can be seen in Figure 1.4 that position B was selected as the preferred seating arrangement by five of the total 132 students. Both of the two tutors who selected position B wrote in additional comments, BU Tutor 3 explained that he normally sits in position A but that his personal space tends to be compromised. Position C was selected as the preferred seating arrangement by eight of the total 132 students surveyed. BU Tutor 4 was the only tutor to select this position as being preferred and explained that he likes this position because he prefers to make eye contact with the tutee. BU Tutor 4 also

utilizes the chalkboard as often as possible and wrote that facing each other is also important for this.

BU Tutee Preferences

As can be seen in Figure 1.4 position A was selected as the preferred seating arrangement by 116 of the total 132 students. Seven of the tutees that selected position A wrote additional comments concerning why they chose the arrangement they did. All seven tutees attributed their preferences to both the tutor and tutee being able to see the book and/or read from a notebook. None of the tutees that chose seating preference B or C provided additional comments.

TCNJ Tutor Preferences

As can be seen in Figure 1.5 position A was selected as the preferred seating arrangement by twenty-four of the total forty-seven students surveyed. Position B was selected by twenty-three of the forty-seven. None of the forty-seven tutors surveyed selected position C. Seven of the tutors that choose position A provided additional comments. Three of the tutors that commented explained that position A made the session more comfortable and another three wrote that it made reading the book easier for both parties. One tutor explained that he and his tutee use a laptop computer and must sit side by side to use it together.

TCNJ Tutee Preferences

As can be seen in Figure 1.5 position A was selected as the preferred seating arrangement by twenty-four of the total forty-seven students surveyed. Of the ten tutees that selected position A as their seating preference, four wrote in additional comments. All four of the tutees attributed their preference to the need for both the tutor and tutee to be able to see the textbook at the same time. Out of the eight tutees that selected position B, three provided additional comments. All three tutees also attributed their preference to the need for both the tutor and tutee to be able to see the textbook at the same time.

Discrepancies

By examining figures 1.4 and 1.5 it is clear that there is a significantly stronger preference toward position A in the BU study as oppose to the TCNJ. After examining each student's additional comments section and collaboration between both researchers it was determined that preference A was chosen more heavily in the BU study because of the positioning of the tables at the BU tutoring center. The BU center consists of two to four person rectangular tables that are not comfortable when sitting on the side because of the table's end leg being in the way. Also, the BU center often arranges the tables so that they are two put together, making a large square. This arrangement would also discourage sitting directly across from another student because of the greater distance between them. It was also

determined that the TCNJ center arranges their smaller tables separately and do not have end legs that would interfere with a students' desires to sit diagonal from each other.

One significant issue that arose during the surveying process at the BU center revolved around a miscommunication about the additional comments section of the survey. Twenty-eight of the tutees that provided additional comments detailed their opinions about their tutors or about their tutoring sessions rather than the position they sit in and how that effects their sessions. The researcher recognized this issue early in the surveying process and too appropriate actions to ensure that students understand what the aim of the study was and what information it was designed to gather. It was determined that the misunderstanding did not effect their seating preference selection, however it is a strong reminder of the importance of thorough instructions and explanations during the research process.

Conclusions

The ultimate goal of this study was to determine if there is a seating arrangement that the majority of tutors and tutees in a tutorial setting prefer during their tutoring sessions. After interpreting the data it is clear that tutors and tutees prefer position A at the BU tutorial center because of easy accessibility of the textbook and notes. It is also certain that position A and B are nearly equally preferred at the TCNJ tutoring center for the same reasoning as in the BU study. Both the BU and TCNJ study revealed that position C is preferred by an insignificant number of students primarily because of the intimidating nature of an across the table approach. Taking into account the arrangement of the tables in the BU center, it is also reasonable to suggest that the BU preferences would have been similar to the TCNJ preferences if the tables were conducive to a diagonal position such as position B.