Tutoría Networks—leading the future of education

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Harvard Professor Richard Elmore offers an online course, <u>Leaders of Learning</u>, that aims to make participants aware of their personal theory of learning and of the type of educational organization, leadership and design better suited to it.

In one of the course's first videos, Elmore quotes Will Richardson on changes that education will undergo in the years to come to reflect our latest understandings about the learning process: instruction will become much more individualized and personalized and learning will take place everywhere. Networks will be the new classrooms.

I find it remarkable that these changes come not from some sort of cosmic revelation, but from a few simple truths about learning that *tutoría* practitioners in Mexico and elsewhere in the world have discovered time and time again. What follows are four of these ideas and the ways they are experienced by *tutoría* learners.

1. **People are born learners: we know what interests us, and we are capable of committing to personal goals.**

Elmore says that the depth in which we learn a topic depends much more on our interest than on someone else's opinion about its importance. We have all experienced that, when it comes to learning something we are interested in, we are happy to spend time reading books, watching videos, taking classes, practicing, and so on. The learning spaces of the future will tap into this potential. The decision about what, how and when to learn will rest more and more in the hands of the true protagonist: the student.

Tutoría students have been experiencing the joy of self-initiated learning for decades. Osvaldo Garcia, a middle school *tutoría* alumnus, says: "I was really surprised on my first day at school because my teacher asked me: "What do you want to learn?"" Learners choose from among the topics mastered by their tutors—teachers or peers--, which provides space for choice from the beginning. As students acquire the tools to learn by themselves,

they can pursue an increasingly wide range of interests without direct help from a tutor. This brings us to the next big idea.

2. Information is widely available, we just need to learn how to take advantage of it.

There is a staggering amount of information available to us through technology. In principle, we can learn anything, but we need the tools to actualize this potential: abilities such as reading comprehension and problem solving.

Cultivating these abilities is priority in *tutoría*. That is why tutors and learners devote a considerable amount of time reflecting about what they've learned and how they've learned it. As they learn a topic, the tutor asks questions like: "What is your tentative answer to this question? Why do you think *that* is the solution? How would you test whether it is true? What did you think about this concept before our dialogue? What do you think now? What helped you see the concept differently? What questions do you still have?"

The purpose is for each *tutoría* experience to provide the student not only an acceptable mastery of the topic, but, more importantly, the certainty that they are able to tackle challenging questions by themselves, that it's OK to test and fail, and that the fruit of their efforts is the satisfaction of learning something for life.

This may take time, but it proves more valuable than covering any curriculum. Maximiliano Alfaro, an alumnus from a *tutoría* middle school that didn't follow the nationally prescribed curriculum, comments on his experience in a traditional high school: "Slowly but surely, my teachers began to realize that I had a bit of more ability to learn independently than my classmates. For example, if we were assigned to read about Newton's second law, everyone else would come back with the formula. But, being curious, I researched the whole process and proved—*proved*—Newton's second law, which wasn't the case for most of my classmates." Maximiliano concludes: "All subjects pose a challenge, a problem. The *tutoría* student is prepared to solve that problem. Why? Because they know how to read for understanding; they are problem solvers." *Tutoría* alumni regularly excel throughout the rest of their education despite not having gone through the traditional curriculum. Or, we should say, they excel *because* they were not force-fed any curriculum.

3. We can all teach what we have mastered.

The single most valuable resource when learning a topic is the help of another person who has mastered it and is willing to share it with us. *Tutoría* derives all its power from facilitating the encounter between a person who is interested in learning a topic and another person who is able to teach it. Thus, tutorial networks provide a realization of the change envisioned by Richardson and Elmore: teachers are everywhere and the most reliable credential to teach is the demonstration of mastery.

The horizontality that characterizes *tutoría* networks—everyone can play the role of tutor—generates an abundance of opportunities to teach and learn in the classroom. Quoting Gabriel Cámara: "Training sessions and classrooms are typically structured around one

person trying to teach standard content to a rather passive group of students. This induced scarcity of opportunities to learn is challenged by the evidence that learning is a social process based on every person's capacity to learn and to teach, provided there is interest and commitment on the part of both the one who teaches and the one who learns. In a learning community constructed through *tutoría* relationships, the induced scarcity disappears.[1]"

The act of tutoring is not only an intense learning experience in its own right, but also an act of service towards the learner. This leads us to the next big idea.

4. **What makes a learning community is the people involved, not the school building.**
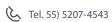
Tutoría dialogue can transform the relationship between the person who learns and the person who teaches. Horizontality is again the key word. Osvaldo comments on what happened after his teacher asked him what he wanted to learn: "Once we went down that road, we formed a very solid relationship. I think that is what it takes—in order to learn, students need to form a relationship with their teacher."

Sharing learning experiences brings personal satisfaction and builds a community. The personal dialogue and attention, as well as the kind of environment cultivated in the *tutoría* classroom can impact and transform previously apathetic or aloof students. Meixi Ng, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Washington, refers to this as "the healing power" of *tutoría*.

Another change proposed by Elmore is that networks will be the new classroom. In the future, more and more learning will occur outside the school building. People with a common interest will come together to learn and thus learning will become much more participative and collaborative. Here, we can mention the *tutoría* network of Rito Longoria, a middle school teacher in Zacatecas, as an example of this. Even years after graduating, students feel they're a part of the community, and many gather weekly in their former school to tutor each other, their younger peers, and other teachers interested in establishing *tutoría* networks in their own schools.

The students of *tutoría* and other student-centered educational models have already revealed other possibilities of what school ca be. Under the pressure of teachers and students alike, the system will slowly but surely yield to forms of organizing the classroom that allow people to thrive in, rather than cope with, school. What new possibilities to learn will young people create, especially considering that technology comes as second-nature to them?

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[1] *Lead the change series--Q&A with Gabriel Cámara*. AERA Educational Change Special Interest Group, Issue 11, November 2011.