Building Peer Tutoring Programs in Writing Centers: A Workshop Description and Report

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Since the 1980s theories of collaborative learning, articulated by Ken Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and others, have informed our teaching and our work with our peers in writing across the curriculum as well as the learning that takes place in our writing centers. Our colleagues, sometimes doubtful of the value of collaborative learning at the outset, are won over by it when they participate in organized activities geared to helping them solve teaching problems. So when we decided to lead an EATAW session on peer tutoring, an emerging discipline outside of the US, we determined to design a workshop rather than give a paper. Rather than make an argument, we wanted to create an environment in which participants not only gained valuable information about peer tutoring in writing centers but also experienced collaborative learning itself – the foundation of peer tutoring. Rather than present our point of view, we wanted participants to talk to others from differently configured institutions and other countries, bringing from their own institutional and national traditions of higher education a wealth of knowledge and experience. There was a lot more knowledge in the room than we, the workshop leaders, had to offer. By organizing participants into small consensus groups working together, pooling their resources, listening, sharing knowledge, and experiencing firsthand how a peer-to-peer discussion can generate ideas we wanted to model the way knowledge about peer tutoring in writing centers can be socially constructed. In our contribution to the proceedings of the 2007 EATAW conference, rather than present an article, we would like to explain some of our choices, present representative, key documents from our interactive workshop on Building Peer Tutoring Programs in Writing Centers, and supply a context within which to place and interpret these documents.

The stated aim of the workshop was to provide participants, in a very short if intense amount of time, a complete overview of the problems, issues, opportunities and arguments for and against starting a peer tutoring program in a writing center as well as strategies for moving an existing program ahead. We organized the complex and inter-related tasks of starting a peer tutoring program into five areas we consider key in establishing and forwarding writing center peer tutoring programs:

- Rationales for Peer Tutoring;
- Developing a Peer Tutoring Budget;
- Training Peer Tutors;
- Publicizing Peer Tutoring; and
- Assessing Peer Tutoring.

We then arranged for the participants to take on these issues, first in small consensus groups, then in the larger collective, where the work of the small groups could be shared, and finally, after the conference itself, though e-mails, where all information could be gathered into one document that included our own commentary.

Workshop Design and Structure:
– We divided the twenty-five participants into five groups, each with tasks tailored to one of the five areas above. The idea was for each group to think in depth about its specific topic and then for all groups to report out, so everyone could discuss and benefit from the work each group had done.
– We were eager to use all the available time, so to save precious minutes, we gave each participant a colored writing center publicity bookmark as they entered the room. Its color corresponded to the group they would join. This avoided the time-consuming decision-making that would have resulted from asking them to choose their own group. It also, and more importantly, reinforced one of our working assumptions: that starting a writing program involves one and all of these activities; they are each significant in their own right and essential to the demands of initiating such a program. One participant balked at her arbitrary group assignment, but we insisted.
– Once the participants were settled in their groups, we gave them each a handout laying out the tasks their group would perform. The group on Assessing Peer Tutoring, for instance, was given the following task, which we will use to demonstrate how the consensus groups did their work.

Task for Group Five: Assessing Peer Tutoring
Please take a moment to introduce yourselves.

Please select someone to act as recorder for your group. It is the recorder's job to take notes and to speak for the group.

Someone *other than the recorder,* please read the following workshop instructions aloud:

ASSUME for the moment that your writing center peer tutoring program is about to begin its initial year. Everything is set to go: the funding is in place: you are about to begin to train the tutors; you have the space issues resolved. However, your administrator has suggested that you plan now to assess the value of the program by the end of its initial year. Although she is in favor of trying a peer tutoring program, she is also concerned that it might be misperceived both by faculty and students.

1. Please compile a list of the current goals of your writing centers.
2. Of these goals, which one or two seem to be held most in common in the group?
3. Recorder, please write this goal(s) on the top of a piece of paper. Working together, try to devise a plan to help you judge in what ways the peer tutoring program may or may not contribute to fulfilling this goal(s) of the writing center. Please make your plan as detailed as possible. What do you need to do to carry it out?

There are important features in our workshop embedded in this and all the other tasks that we designed. For instance, the self-introductions are essential to get a sense of who is in the group and where they come from. This is an important, if obvious, ice-breaker, and it is similar to the kinds of introductions tutors will probably find useful as well, as they set to work with someone they may never have seen before.
Asking the group to select a recorder is also essential. It engages the group in its very first, relatively easy decision. Someone inevitably volunteers for this role, easing tension, and the group begins to coalesce around the recorder. This person knows from the outset that he or she will be responsible for taking careful notes and speaking for the group. This person will paraphrase, prioritize, and explain the small group's consensus to the entire group of participants. We then had another group member read the task aloud so that all group members would have a sense of where the exercises were heading. And, as a result, now at least two members of the group have become engaged in forwarding the task. By the time that task has been read aloud, the group knows something of each other, has a recorder, and is settling down to the business at hand.
Notice also that the task requires first that the group make a list. Making lists has both the value of gathering together individual ideas from as many members of the group as possible while not yet challenging the individuals in the group to confront the differences that

they are bringing with them. Usually, everyone in the group is happy to help build the list. It is a generative process of addition, not selection or comparison.

They then followed the list-making task with analytical, collaborative judgments. Here they begin the hard work of collaboration, involving negotiation, careful listening, consensus building, and, perhaps most importantly, dissent. As they worked, we, the workshop leaders, stayed out of the groups. As they worked, we could hear rich discussions of their different institutional contexts, descriptions of their spaces, their reporting hierarchies, their budgets, and more, but our authority as workshop leaders remained outside the authority that was being established within the groups themselves.

We adhered very strictly to a brisk timetable, so that all groups could report out and everyone could benefit from the work that other groups had done. As keepers of the clock, we maintained our authority and responsibility for the workshop. When the time was up, we called them all to order in the large group.

As each group reported out, we asked the recorder to read aloud the tasks they were asked to perform. We felt that this reminder was essential to the group members themselves. If they had gone onto tangents, it reminded them of the various areas the other group members would find important. As the recorder read, the others were able to follow along in the printed handouts they had of all the group tasks.

Here is what the recorder for the Assessment Group had to report:

Recorder's Report:

Goals for peer tutoring:
- Help faculty understand writing to learn
- Help students survive writing tasks
- Help students reflect on their writing
- Help students learn about genres

Ways of assessing:
- Basic survey of student satisfaction with and perceptions of the writing center
- Statistical evaluations of student grades and academic standing

As each reported out, we took careful notes on a flip chart so that others could see our notes and the analysis of the reports. At the end of the workshop we asked each group to write up and e-mail us their notes so that we could compile them and send them to everyone. We used the flip chart notes to add to the e-mails they sent, in some cases, and we added our own comments to the report we mailed to them after the conference was over. Here is what we said in response to the Assessment Group report:

Paula and Harvey Respond:
Those who have tried to assess the effects of peer tutoring, of tutoring in general, of writing instruction, and the like, have a very difficult task. A writing center is only one set of influences on writing and on learning in an institution.

So we really appreciate the level of specificity and clarity this group produced. Their goals for the writing center with a peer tutoring program are both ambitious and sensible. Most importantly, the goals are spelled out in ways that faculty, staff and administrators can understand. We especially like that the first goal has to do with educating faculty. Yes, indeed. And the basic survey is, indeed, the place that such an assessment usually and should begin. Careful and consistent asking and listening to student feedback is crucial.

At Marquette Paula has tutors-in-training do a self-assessment by tape recording a tutoring session, meeting with her, and going over the tape. She is less interested during the training in having the session go perfectly than she is in seeing that the tutors are able to critique their own sessions and know where to improve. At the University of Maine, Harvey includes on the tutorial evaluation form a request that the writing center be permitted to follow the written evaluation with a phone interview a week or so later Each semester he randomly calls about a quarter of those who have agreed to a follow-up interview. He asks how they did on their paper and, in retrospect, how useful the tutorial was. While the ratings do slip some from the perhaps over enthusiastic tutorial evaluation, they largely and in good detail yield useful assessment material on the value of peer tutoring for student writers.

It is indeed possible to make some claims for writing center services. Surveys do provide us with a sense that writers are satisfied, are grateful for the writing center, and that they feel they have made good progress through their sessions. Even though we want to know more about how students benefit from collaborative learning, we have to know at least this much to continue our work and be persuasive with our colleagues and administrators.

University-wide surveys of student satisfaction affirm that writing centers contribute to the «fit and feel» that students experience within their institutions. So the mere presence of the writing center makes students feel that their needs are important and that they could seek help.

The e-mailed document also includes a general bibliography of works we two had published, separately and together, on peer tutoring. We also included a bibliography for each of the five subject areas we list above, all of which we are pleased to append to this discussion of the workshop. Longman Press also generously contributed a copy for each participant of *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring,* 2nd edition, by Paula and Neal Lerner.

Writing centers professionals can and should be in the business of helping each other develop their centers and peer tutoring. EATAW is the ideal setting for such collaborative work, since participants will encounter contexts that vary dramatically from their own. We hope that participants will design, structure, and conduct their own workshops for their colleagues and peers at their home institutions on issues that concern them.

We invite you to browse through the entire packet of workshop documents that can be found at http://www.marquette.edu/writingcenter/documents/Completeddocument.doc. We hope that it will be of use to you both as a primer for starting a writing center-based peer tutoring program as well as a model for one way of building an interactive workshop experience.

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