

Training Peer Tutors in Writing: A Pragmatic, Research-based Approach¹

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Abstract

This article argues that increased discussion of peer tutor training is important for the development of peer writing schemes in Europe. It examines the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre training programme, which is based on extensive research into factors underlying successful tutorials. The article reports on the rationale for the training programme and on initial evaluation of its success.

Introduction: Peer Tutoring in Writing

In North America, collaborative peer tutoring in writing has become established as the normal method of supplementary writing support on most university campuses. For over thirty years, peer tutors have worked in Writing Centers which at some large universities offer more than 20000 tutorial sessions a year. Writing Centres and peer tutoring often complement and supplement compulsory first year Composition courses («Freshman Writing»), and it is from the field of Composition that Writing Centres take much of their pedagogy.

Ken Bruffee, one of the pioneers of the peer tutoring movement, points out that the origin of this model of collaborative learning lies in «the nearly desperate

response» of institutions in the early 1970s to non-traditional and often under-prepared students in a new era of open-admissions and extending participation policies. According to Bruffee, «the common denominator among both the poorly prepared and the seemingly well-prepared was that, for cultural reasons we may not yet fully understand all these students seemed to have difficulty adapting to the traditional or <normal> conventions of the college classroom» (1984, 637). Bruffee states that these students often refused the support that was available on campus from professionals and post-graduates. Instead, what was needed was an alternative to the traditional classroom, not more of the same (637). As a result, collaborative peer tutoring came to prominence across the US.²

¹ The writing of this essay has been supported by the collaborative Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning funded by HEFCE at London Metropolitan University, Liverpool Hope University and Aston University (www.writenow.ac.uk).

² For the rationale for peer tutoring in writing, see e.g. Devet in Devet et al., 2006. For the importance of collaborative learning, see Lunsford, 1991. See O'Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi forthcoming for a full discussion of the rationale for peer tutoring in the UK context.

Today in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, many universities find themselves in a situation similar to the US in the early 1970s, with university education more and more seen as an economic necessity rather than a humanistic or a cultural privilege, and governments putting pressure on universities to expand into new populations. It is not surprising, then, to find that there has been increasing interest in peer mentoring as a means of writing support.³

In particular, undergraduate peer tutoring in writing in the UK has been pioneered by Matthew Martin and Jonathan Worley at St Mary's University College, Belfast, and in Germany by Gerd Bräuer at the Freiburg Pädagogische Hochschule.⁴ In the UK, the Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) has recently supported the development of peer tutoring in writing programmes at London Metropolitan University, Aston University and Liverpool Hope University. At London Metropolitan University, a «Student Writing Mentor Scheme» is the main student-facing service of the University Writing Centre, an initiative of the Write Now CETL. Our choice of the term «writing mentor» rather than «peer tutor» reflects the ethos of our scheme.⁵ As Ender and Newton say:

It should be carefully noted that in forming a mentoring relationship the point is not to create dependency but to promote self-direction. A mentor may serve as a catalyst for change – but when a goal is achieved or a skill accomplished the partner must be able to own the achievement as their own. (2000, 16–17)

Students are trained to work with other students for one hour on a one-to-one basis, offering support on all aspects of academic writing. Around 2000 tutorials have taken place over the first three years of the scheme, with over 900 held during the most recent academic year 2008–09. The aim has been to establish a high quality scheme, to research its effectiveness and to disseminate our findings across the sector.

Other universities in the UK have expressed interest in establishing similar writing support schemes, which

³ Note that some have warned against assuming that peer tutoring is appropriate to the UK context (Devet et al., 2006). However, they offer little evidence to support their misgivings (see O'Neill 2008 for a response)

⁴ Note also the post-graduate writing mentor scheme led by Phyllis Creme at University College, London.

⁵ For the contradictions inherent in the term peer tutor, see Trimbur 1987.

have the potential to be run by academic departments, learning development units, or other student service departments as well as by Writing Centres. When people contact us about our scheme, they are particularly interested in our training programme. This seems to be an area where people are most uncertain and nervous about what is involved.⁶ We believe that if peer tutoring schemes are to expand, those responsible for these programmes need to share and discuss their methods of training peer tutors. This will assist other institutions thinking about setting up such schemes and help existing programmes to reflect on their ways of training peer tutors and to improve their own practice.⁷

Training Peer Tutors

In the United States, training of peer tutors has become an area of intellectual and academic interest in its own right.⁸ In many US universities, students who have been selected to tutor in the Writing Center take credit-bearing courses combining discussion, Writing Center scholarship, practice and reflection.⁹ These courses are often full-semester courses or sometimes summer courses.¹⁰ There are now a number of books devoted to Writing Centre Training as well as readers available for peer tutors containing highlights from Writing Center scholarship.¹¹

In Europe, the degree structure is traditionally less flexible and more prescribed than in North America, and there is less scope for a credit-bearing training course.

⁶ See Gillespie and Kail, 2008 for an article reporting on a workshop at the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing conference in Bochum in 2007 designed to help European practitioners set up peer tutoring programmes and focusing in part on training.

⁷ Note that the focus of this paper is on training peer tutors. In a forthcoming work, we will discuss other practical issues connected with setting up and establishing a peer tutoring in writing scheme.

⁸ See Boquet 1999, 475 for articles on training and staff selection dominating north American Writing Centre scholarship in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the period when peer tutoring schemes were becoming established in the US.

⁹ Note that peer tutor training in US Writing Centers is often less formalised. Cf. Boquet 1999, 475: «this training began as, and remains, a hybrid, like the writing center itself, a mix of institutional accountability and critique, of credit-bearing courses and informal discussions over pizza and doughnuts.»

¹⁰ See Boquet 2002, 83–135 for a moving account of the development of peer tutors which can take place in such a course.

¹¹ Tutor training textbooks or manuals include Clark, 1998; McAndrew and Reigstad, 2001; Ryan and Zimmerelli, 2006; and Gillespie and Lerner, 2008b. Readers include Barnett and Blumner, 2008; and Murphy and Sherwood, 2008.

However, this is not necessarily a weakness. Terrance Riley has criticised such credit-bearing courses:

The one-semester tutoring course (the preferred approach) ought to attract the best prospective tutors from all across the college, but few devoted physics or history majors will actually risk credits and a grade for a chance to work in the writing center. The course is an attractive option only for English majors, and this tends to keep the writing center in the English department. (1994, 30–31).

By contrast, at London Met, where such a course is not required for peer tutors, the writing mentors are drawn from disciplines across the university and only one of the mentors has been a student of English. This provides more opportunities for writing to be discussed from a disciplinary perspective and is in accordance with Writing in the Disciplines approaches (cf. Monroe, 2002 and 2003) and also Academic Literacies thinking which sees writing «problems» as often reflecting confusions concerning disciplinary epistemologies and «ways of doing» (Lea and Street, 1997).

Training (along with careful selection of peer tutors¹²) is probably the key to a successful scheme. If we are to gain the support of the academic community for our work, peer tutoring programmes need to be, as Bruffee points out, «academically sound» (Bruffee in Beck et al., 447). A good training programme is an important aspect of this and is essential if we want to win over academic colleagues who may be sceptical of claims that students can effectively help other students – and that indeed in some areas they may be precisely the most effective facilitators of support.¹³ Moreover, it is attention to training and development which may

12 Recruitment at London Met is selective, with all university students encouraged to apply. The application process involves submitting a writing sample and statement explaining the student's interest in the positions. We then hold interviews and (crucially) obtain an academic reference from successful candidates. When selecting mentors, we look for students whose own writing is above average (but not necessarily of the highest classification) and who, importantly, demonstrate an ability and a desire to facilitate other students' writing development in a non-directive, supportive way, rather than through more directive teaching or providing answers. In addition, we ask staff members to recommend students who they think will make excellent writing mentors, and this has helped us gain academic approval for our scheme.

13 See Beck et al., 1978 for an interesting account of training peer tutors in writing by a number of pioneers in the field. They stress the importance of training to develop tutors academically and socially (433).

well most clearly distinguish peer tutoring in writing schemes from more general peer-assisted learning programmes found on many campuses.¹⁴

Training Programme: a research-based approach

In the first year of our scheme at London Met, we were fortunate enough to have Matthew Martin and Jonathan Worley from St Mary's University College, Belfast, conduct our initial two-day training, in September 2006. This training was very successful. The presence of the Belfast team created a sense of occasion which was important as we launched our scheme. Two peer tutors from St Mary's were in attendance and helped give our own peer tutors a real feel for the work that they would be doing.

The London Met Writing Specialist then led on-going weekly team meetings during the autumn semester. However, in the second semester it proved impossible to get all the peer mentors together during the week because of timetable clashes. It soon became clear that the only occasion when we could definitely expect to get all the peer mentors together for training was in the week before lectures and seminars began. It was also clear that we would want to revise the training in year two in order to assume ownership of the scheme and to make it as relevant as possible to the student body at London Met, which is a much larger and much less homogenous institution than St Mary's. But above all, we wanted the training to reflect the results of our research into what happened in a writing centre session and our attempt to discover the core themes underlying the most effective peer tutorials.

In 2006–07, over 670 hour-long tutorials were conducted by a team of eleven writing mentors. Following each tutorial, mentors provided open-ended written feedback in response to the following prompt: «Please reflect on your session. (e.g. How do you feel you were able to help the student? What could have gone better?)» The purpose of this feedback was to support the mentors' ongoing reflective practice as well as to generate data for qualitative research into the factors underlying successful tutorials. A thematic analysis (cf. Braun and Clark, 2006) of all mentors' comments was conducted by a team of three researchers, whose interpretations were controlled and validated through comparison of independent readings. The research was thus designed to discover from the mentors' point of view what

14 See Falchikov, 2001 for peer tutoring in general (as opposed to peer tutoring in writing).

was happening during successful and unsuccessful tutorials. This paper presents a selection of the results of this research relevant to the development of our training programme; a full report will be published elsewhere.¹⁵

Table 1 shows the four main themes and related sub-themes that emerged from the analysis.

Table 1. Thematic overview of Writing Mentors' comments (2006-07)

Main theme	Sub-themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a rapport • Encouragement/emotional support • Setting expectations • Non-directive enabling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student's relationship to own writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence/anxiety • Finding own voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and mentor working together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating/writing together • Informal talk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor self-reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges • Satisfaction

Theme one: Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor

We found that the most important factor in determining the success of a tutorial was the interpersonal relationship between mentor and student, and the extent to which this was developed. The tutorials that seemed to bring greatest benefit to students, based on the mentors' observations, were those in which mentors were able to establish a rapport with their students, to attend supportively to the emotional and psychological aspects of writing faced by students, to contribute explicitly to shaping students' expectations of the kind of writing support mentors are trained and able to offer, and to work non-directively to enable the students to take ownership of their own writing.

Theme two: Student's relationship to own writing

The way students felt about their own writing also contributed significantly to the shape of the tutorials. In the most successful tutorials, mentors responded sensitively to students' individual experiences of anxiety

¹⁵ See Harrington, et al. 2007 for a summary of findings, and O'Neill et al. forthcoming for a full report.

and confidence about their own writing as well as provided a non-judgmental space for students to take risks with new ways of expressing themselves in the attempt to find their own voices within the conventions of their academic disciplines.

Theme three: Student and mentor working together

Successful tutorials also took advantage of the full hour allocated to each session by engaging students in hands-on, collaborative writing activities, such as free writing and mind-mapping, and by simultaneously creating a supportive, informal and often playful environment for students to speak about their writing. We found that mentors worked primarily as encouraging peers, rather than as subject experts, who aimed to meet students wherever they were in their own writing process and to facilitate their development to the next step. This could mean working with students before they had done any writing for a particular assignment, or even before they had a sense of what they wanted to write or how to go about it. Such <blank-slate> situations were used as opportunities to set the writing and thinking process in motion, which the student could then take further following the tutorial.

Theme Four: Mentor self-reflections

We also found that the more self-reflective mentors were about their own work, the more likely they were to create a successful tutorial experience for students as well as experience the tutorials as rewarding for themselves. For mentors, the most challenging aspect of the tutorials was responding helpfully but firmly to students' expectations that were at variance with the non-directive, collaborative nature of the tutorials. An ability to reflect on the dynamics of the tutorial, and on one's own role in shaping those dynamics, enabled the mentors to develop their practice and gain confidence in themselves as effective mentors. The mentors also expressed a high degree of satisfaction in being part of the process of helping fellow students evolve as academic writers.

In September 2007, the London Met Writing Specialist revised the Writing Mentor training programme in order to build upon our research into what happens in peer tutorials and to promote further the factors which we had identified as leading to successful learning. The new, current training is very much focused on the results of this research and emphasises the core factors which seem to lie at the heart of successful

tutorials while leaving space for the mentors to develop their own style and way of teaching. We do not want to prescribe a certain way of tutoring or even to tell our mentors how to teach. Rather, we want to allow our tutors to develop their own unique way of tutoring which respects the ethos and the principles underlying the scheme.

Table 2 is a session by session overview of our intensive pre-semester training. We are certainly not claiming by any means that we have got everything right or that what is right for us will be right for other institutions. Indeed, as we will discuss later, there are arguably some major omissions in our programme. However, we hope that what follows will give potential facilitators of such schemes an idea of the kinds of topics and issues which seem to us useful for training peer tutors in writing and encourage them to create their own training programmes.

Our training programme is designed to prepare mentors to feel confident about meeting their first student and to give them an understanding of the key principles of the

scheme and of effective ways of offering writing support and of the resources which they can use with students. However, we very much believe that in many ways the real learning occurs «on the job» and that it is through tutoring that the mentors begin to internalise the principles of the scheme, which before this necessarily remain somewhat abstract in nature. In order to help students learn through their experiences of tutoring, we expect our mentors to reflect continuously about their experiences of tutoring. After each session, the mentors write about what happened in the tutorial, what worked and what did not and how what happened corresponded with the principles of the scheme. These post-tutorial reflections are accompanied by weekly contributions to a «wiki» where mentors talk to each other about their teaching and answer specific questions which the Writing Centre team poses to them.

Encouraging a culture of reflective practice is the most essential aspect in producing high quality tutoring and in ensuring that standards do not slip and that tutors do not run on «auto-pilot». The preliminary training is in

Table 2. Pre-semester training: an outline

Day One Sessions	Activities	Objective
Introductions	Mentors freewrite for 10 minutes on how they think they will be able to help students. They then talk about what they have written as they introduce themselves to the group.	To model the kind of activities which the mentors might themselves use with students To encourage an atmosphere of «getting writing done» which is essential to the scheme.
Helping student writers	We look at a student essay and each mentor comes up with a list of three areas which they would want to discuss with a student in a writing tutorial. They discuss their ideas in groups followed by a plenary discussion.	To make clear to the mentors (some of whom may be sceptical of their own abilities) that they are all able to help fellow students make improvements to their writing, even if they may lack expertise To give mentors an idea of the kinds of help which they will be providing to students.
What happens in a tutorial session?	This session presents the results of our research into factors underlying successful tutorials and examines the implications of the thematic analysis. Returning mentors conduct role-play mini-tutorials exemplifying good and bad practice which the new mentors discuss.	To inform the mentors about the objectives of the scheme and the principles and ethics underlying it To give them a clear sense of the ways in which the scheme aims to help students.
The Writing Process	Mentors reflect on and discuss their own writing process and we think about the various stages involved in producing effective writing and how improving all aspects of our process leads to a better final product.	To show how awareness of the writing process offers opportunities for improving our own writing and for helping others to improve their writing.
Disciplinary Writing	The mentors reflect on the particular features of writing in their own discipline and we discuss these differences as a group and examine aspects of writing which disciplines have in common.	To raise awareness of the importance of being sensitive to the conventions of different disciplines and to make the mentors feel confident that they can effectively help students working in disciplines which they may know very little about.
Role-play	The mentors role-play mini-tutorials in which they discuss aspects of the writing process and disciplinary writing.	To give mentors a sense that they can help other students and a feel for the work that they will be doing.

Day Two Sessions	Activities	Objectives
When tutorials go well	We examine extracts from mentors' reflections following tutorials in year one of the scheme. We look at instances where tutorials seem to have gone well and try to unpack exactly what was effective and what we can learn from them.	To build up an ideal model of a tutorial session, where non-directive enabling, collaboration and writing together underlie the approach to the tutorial.
Dealing with challenges in tutorials	In this session we look at extracts from mentors' reflections where mentors faced particular challenges or where things seem to have gone wrong. We look at ways in which these problems can be avoided and also situations which may always be unsatisfactory. In particular, we examine issues such as avoiding short tutorials, making full use of the available hour, establishing boundaries and setting expectations, avoiding temptations to proofread, and dealing with frustration.	To look at instances where the ideal model of a tutorial session seems to have failed and to examine strategies for dealing with difficult situations.
Referencing	This session discusses what referencing systems mentors use in their own discipline and the reasons for referencing. We look at available resources for the various referencing systems they are likely to encounter.	To enable the mentors to work with students on referencing and to provide appropriate handouts and resources which they can use To emphasise that they do not need to be an expert in all these referencing systems To enable mentors to feel confident in dealing with issues pertaining to plagiarism.
Dealing with reports.	We look at generic features typical of reports in a number of disciplines, such as structure, and identify issues that can be discussed with students who are writing reports (for example, the function of the report and its audience).	To offer mentors ways to work effectively with students who may be working on reports in disciplines with which they may not be familiar.
Revision strategies	We think about what revision entails and how thorough revision depends on considering the meaning of the essay. We encourage mentors to focus on global issues before dealing with surface-level issues. We discuss ways of working with students on grammar which involve the students doing the work and learning (reading aloud etc). We consider plagiarism and ethical forms of support.	To help mentors work effectively with students on revising their texts and ensuring that they focus on issues of content and meaning as well as surface-level issues To suggest ways of helping with surface-level issues without proofreading or editing the student's writing.
Working with students with learning disabilities	A member of staff from the Learning Disabilities Unit talks about how our mentors can support students with learning difficulties, what their responsibilities are as employees of the University, and the other sources of support the University offers for students with learning difficulties.	To help mentors identify and support students with learning disabilities To consider the kinds of accommodations that need to be made in tutorials with students who have declared a learning disability.

some ways simply to ensure that mentors feel prepared to meet their first student as quickly as possible. Then, if mentors are encouraged to constantly reflect on their tutoring, they will find their own way of teaching writing as they work with students.

Here is a reflection from a mentor following her first tutorial in the Writing Centre.

[The student] was concerned about the writing itself. She had done a good deal of research already and knew her facts. Her problem was that she got sidetracked by her own writing and said

she repeated herself and was a bit all over the place. I suggested to write a rough draft first to get all the information out there and on paper. And then focus on getting it «fine-tuned». To write the first draft I suggested she freewrite, which we did in the session and she seemed very comfortable with it and realised how much she already knew. The session went quite well. It was just a bit hard to identify why she was here at first as she would go off on a tangent and talk about some other part concerning her essay. It was my first tutorial and I hope I helped her. I think it went ok. Maybe I could

have been a bit less directive, but she was so all over the place it was a bit hard. But I enjoyed it nonetheless.

Here we see the mentor struggling to assess what happened in the tutorial and come to the conclusion that in future she should try to be less directive. She perhaps also comes to realise through reflecting (although she is less explicit about this) that she needs to work with the student to develop clearer goals for the session.

Evaluating the success of the training programme

To help us assess the effectiveness of the training programme implemented in 2007–08, we conducted a second thematic analysis of all mentors' comments following the tutorials they held in that year (over 630). We found that the same broad themes emerged as presented in the table above (table 1), but that an explicit awareness of the importance of working collaboratively as an enabler or facilitator, rather than as a teacher or assessor, was both more pronounced in mentors' evaluations of the success of their tutorials and evident across all the mentors, rather than concentrated in the comments of some.

In the first thematic analysis, we found a few instances of non-collaborative, overly directive approaches with students, though these instances could be isolated to fewer than 5% of the total tutorials delivered. In addition, several of the comments analysed in the first round were insufficiently detailed for the researchers to make an accurate assessment of whether the underlying principles of the scheme were upheld or not. However, in the second thematic analysis, we did not find any instances of non-collaborative working, and the level of detail provided in the commentary across the mentors was substantially higher and revealed a greater degree of reflexivity on the nature of being a writing mentor.

It could be argued that an explanation for this shift lies in the mentors becoming more aware of what we were looking for in their comments, and so writing what they knew we would want to find. However, the fact that the comments did not become formulaic, but were instead highly varied and consistently reflective of the uniqueness of each tutorial that took place, and also that the mentors did not refrain from commenting on frustrated attempts to work according to the scheme's underlying principles, suggests to us that following the

training programme in 2007–08, the mentors had more thoroughly internalised the non-directive, collaborative principles of the scheme and were better able to use these principles to measure their own success as mentors.

We were also keen to know what students who came to the Writing Centre thought of the tutorials they received. After the first semester of the 2007–08 academic year, a questionnaire was sent to all students who had participated in writing mentor tutorials over the first eighteen months of the scheme's operation (n=602). An online questionnaire was chosen for pragmatic and practical reasons and was designed to provide quantitative results while also allowing for open-ended comments amenable to a qualitative approach. Again, this paper presents selected findings relevant to the development of our training programme; some results from this study have been published elsewhere, and a full report is forthcoming.¹⁶ Ninety-nine students completed the questionnaire, and of these students, 90% indicated that overall they were very satisfied or satisfied with the tutorials they had, while 8% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and 3% indicated that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. When asked an open-ended question about what they liked most about the tutorials, 25.8% of students commented on the mentor's approach and the process of the sessions (e.g., «laughed about things like bibliographies, and learnt about it together»). The same percentage of students indicated what they liked most was that they received «help» or «feedback», while 18.2% commented on the non-judgemental atmosphere and tone of the sessions, 10.6% mentioned learning about an aspect of academic writing, 7.6% mentioned an improved attitude to themselves and their writing as a result of the tutorials, and 6.0% mentioned the one-to-one nature of the tutorials (with 3.0% indicating «N/A» and another 3.0% commenting that they did not know).

Given the improvement in mentors' self-awareness and capacity for reflection in 2007–08, coupled with a high degree of student satisfaction with the tutorials

¹⁶ For more on the questionnaire study and findings from a subset of the data on experiences of Psychology students who visited the Writing Centre, see Bakhshi et al., 2009. Note in particular page 12 which discusses the strengths and limitations of this study. The sample of students who completed the questionnaire was varied and largely representative of the students who visited the Writing Centre (in terms of subjects and level of study). See Harrington et al. forthcoming for a full report.

they had at the Writing Centre, we are encouraged to think that the training programme we have developed is succeeding in its aims to provide a solid grounding in the scheme's underlying principles and to enable the mentors to feel confident about working with these principles in their own practice with students.

The Place of Technical Knowledge and Scholarship

We are aware that the limited time available means that our training programme perhaps does not involve as much technical knowledge or composition theory and scholarship as we might wish. We do strive to provide tutors with essential information and technical knowledge needed for effective tutoring in academic writing; however, we aim to avoid overloading tutors with information before they need it in practice. For instance, we provide information on referencing, since this is an area where our mentors need to be very careful about the advice they give. We do not expect our writing mentors to know the intricacies of the different referencing systems. However, we provide them with useful resources so that they can work through these together as co-learners with students in the Writing Centre. As Harris says, «the art of the tutor is to collaborate with students as they acquire the practical knowledge they need» (1995, 34). We also provide information on report writing, offering strategies for helping students who might be working in areas where the mentors are inexperienced. And in the two-day Spring training, we cover dissertation writing, as all third-year London Met students write a compulsory dissertation or final project in the Spring semester of their final year and many will choose to visit the Writing Centre for support.

Our approach to technical expertise reflects the fact that our mentors are mentors, not teachers or experts or «writing specialists». The best way for students to learn how to write is by writing. Our mentors' job is to help them engage with this often painful process and to help student writers feel confident they can do it. Our training focuses above all on ways of facilitating this.¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. North 1982, 434: «Tutoring in writing is, to state it simply, intervention in the composing process. Writers come to the writing centre sometime during the writing of something looking for help. Often, they don't know what kind of help is available, practicable, or sensible... They seem to think that tutoring in writing means either coming to *know* something new or getting something *done* to or for them. In fact, though, they need help *doing* something... A tutor training course, then, develops people

It is through talking about their ideas and through actual writing that students will develop the skills and understanding that they need and gain a sense of ownership of their ideas and work. Peers can be an excellent means of support, guiding students as they make their way through difficulties. As Corbett (2007) points out (drawing on Bruffee and Trimbur), there is a danger that «the collaborative effect of peership, the positive effects of working closer perhaps to the student's Vygotskyan zone of proximal development (or the level of problem solving ability just out of reach of the student, but attainable with the aid of a capable peer), will be lost if tutors are trained to be too teacherly» (np).

Moreover, no two tutorials will ever be the same and it is impossible to prepare students for every situation. And if we try to do so, they may approach the tutorial with a closed rather than an open mind, more concerned to apply technical knowledge than participate in a unique process with the student. Our experience suggests that what is needed is to prepare the mentors to have the confidence to really listen to what students are saying and allow them to write and do their own work themselves.¹⁸

In many North American training programmes, great importance is often given to Writing Centre theory and scholarship. Therefore, a training programme which does not offer much compulsory reading might seem deficient. However, even without the pragmatic consideration of lack of time, there are good reasons for avoiding too much emphasis on theory and scholarship in our training. We train our tutors to go straight to the

who understand tutoring as intervention in the composing process and who can do something about it.»

¹⁸ Several of our writing mentors have had TEFL or similar experience and qualifications. However, we have noted no major differences when it comes to tutoring between these and other mentors. For more on the issue of expertise vs. collaboration, see Trimbur 1987, 26: «To follow the apprentice model and emphasize expertise and theory is to conceive of peer tutoring as an arm of the writing program, a way to deliver state-of-the-art instruction in writing to tutees. To follow the co-learner model and emphasize collaboration and experiential learning is to conceive of peer tutoring as a semi-autonomous activity that contributes to the formation of a student culture that takes writing seriously.» Note 28: «My worry is that the conception of tutoring as an apprenticeship treats students as extensions of our profession and can reinforce their dependence on faculty authority. To emphasize expertise at the expense of an experiential knowledge of co-learning risks short circuiting the dynamics of collaboration in student culture – the communities of readers and writers that are always in the process of formation when peers work together in writing centers.»

heart of whatever a student is working on, to discuss the question without worrying that they need to be experts or to have mastered the scholarship and reading on a subject that may well be beyond their expertise. Their job is to help students be as clear as possible about what they need to do for any particular assignment and to discuss student drafts in the light of this. In such cases, a writing mentor in, for example, Film Studies, working with a student from Psychology, may actually find that a lack of knowledge of Psychology literature helps her to get straight to the heart of the question and find out what it is that the student has to say.¹⁹ Similarly, in the training it can be an advantage to go straight to the heart of tutoring writing without feeling that one has to frame the discussion in terms of academic debate. One learns the importance of collaboration by doing it not by reading about it, and even Andrea Lunsford's marvellous article on this topic may detract from the tutors' own focus on what happens in tutorials which is what the training is really about.²⁰ As developers of the training programme, it is our job to distil what seems to be most important in the scholarship and offer this to the tutors. We also see it as an advantage to let tutors engage directly with what they will be doing right from the start, which is what our training tries to facilitate as we model approaches that we hope mentors will use with students.²¹

Conclusion

We have seen that the rapport and connection between student and mentor is central to a successful tutorial. Getting this right is as much the responsibility of the mentor as the student, in fact more so. There can be no connection unless the mentor is open to whatever situation he or she encounters in the Writing Centre. And it is this open relationship which allows a student's thoughts to emerge. Everything else follows from this, not least words on paper. And one can only really open up in this way if one is not playing a role or trying to be

an expert or a teacher. In short, if we want our mentors to succeed in this work and to fully take advantage of the opportunities offered by the peer relationship, we must allow them to be themselves. And this also means that any training programme needs to have confidence in the tutors it hires and in their ability to carry out this challenging, rewarding and above all important work. Finally, we should point out that this training programme seems to work for our institution, reflecting research into our own scheme and the pragmatics of our local situation. Other institutions will want to adopt their own model. However, we hope that those interested in starting such schemes will find this discussion useful and that there will be more European discussion about training students to work with students in our own particular contexts.

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¹⁹ However, it should be pointed out that our booking system does allow students to book a session with a writing mentor from their own field if one is available. Such disciplinary sessions bring many advantages in terms of developing confidence in understanding the academic literacies associated with a particular discipline.

²⁰ Lunsford, 1991.

²¹ Note Riley 1994, 150 who critiques credit-bearing Writing Centre training courses for replicating traditional university instruction and rewarding those who get high grades in a conventional class: «But by this time, the writing center is no longer unconventional; it is close to being simply another academic unit, not unlike Composition 1.»

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