Students or staff: Thoughts on the use of peer tutors in writing centers

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The establishment of peer tutoring programs in writing centers is one of the most promising educational innovations to emerge from the 1970s, It is promising in part because it shows that administrators and faculty are catching on to something that is deeply rooted in student culture- -the power of peer influence when directed toward learning. Educators have recognized since at least the early sixties that peer relationships constitute an important potential source of learning. In 1962, the social psychologist Theodore M. Newcomb presented his findings that peer-group influence is the single most powerful force in shaping college students' attitudes toward their education.' Peer influence, of course, can lead to *Animal House* antics and worse. But it can also lead, on the other hand, to the intellectual commitment of conversations where students talk, in deeply personal and meaningful ways, about everything from the death of Socrates to Einstein's theory of relativity. Students have always banded together to interpret and cope with their undergraduate experience. If the social energy generated by college peer groups sometimes manifests itself in anti-intellectual and anti-social ways, this energy also powers the rap sessions and informal study groups that seem to arise spontaneously in student culture, the self help circles students have traditionally organized to deal with the intellectual demands of their coursework.

Peer tutoring in writing centers, then, is an attempt, as Kenneth A. Bruffee says in his seminal article "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring," to tap into the "immense natural educational resource" of peer influence and to mobilize that influence in an academic context devoted to intellectual and social development.[2] Writing centers formalize what had existed before only informally, the networks of mutual aid that students have always developed among themselves. But what happens when we institutionalize practices that previously emerged spontaneously, outside of the conventional academic structure? For those of us who administer writing programs and writing centers, the question is critical. Do the ways we use peer tutors in writing centers begin to realize educational promise of peer influence directed toward learning? Just to ask the question, I suppose, is to suggest some misgivings on my part. My fear is that in our attempts to innovate, we still carry old habits with us and at times reproduce old attitudes and relationships that undercut the great educational promise of peer tutoring.

Writing centers and academic support services

One old habit most writing centers must shake is the stigma of remediation associated with academic support services. Writing centers, at least in the way they

appear on some deans' flow charts, tend to be located in the larger realm of basic skills and academic support services. Administrators, faculty, and students alike often look upon writing centers as clinics for the sick and wounded to get a checkup and a cure. According to this unfortunately common view, student writing is a matter of public hygiene, something to be cleaned up or patched up by first aid. But it's not simply these clinical connotations I'm worried about. What concerns me is that this support service model duplicates the traditional academic hierarchy by assigning the most "difficult" students and the most mechanical tasks to the lowest ranked staff, in many cases to peer tutors who work in writing centers.

The dramatic growth of writing centers in the seventies occurred with the arrival of what are often called non-traditional students: minority students formerly excluded from higher education, students from the working class and lower middle class families, older returning students, and so on. Whatever their backgrounds, these students, as well as an apparently growing number of traditional college-bound students, did not seem to perform well in the traditional classroom. And they certainly perplexed the faculty who held traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. Writing centers emerged in the seventies in the midst of a wider response to the learning styles of these new students, as part of an attempt to keep the open door from becoming a revolving door.

Remediation and academic support services became a growth industry, quickly producing and marketing its own line of student-centered services--learning labs, self-paced modules, math and text anxiety workshops, study skills centers, computer assisted instruction, even the faintly onanistic auto-tutorial. And these new services created a new stratum of jobs for faculty and administrators in basic skills programs and academic support services, mostly in low prestige positions often with only a marginal relationship to an academic department, in learning centers staffed by students and paraprofessionals. The job assigned these services is to support classroom instruction by preparing non-traditional students for college work--to help these students fill in the gaps in their education and to get them through their coursework. This is known as "being in the trenches," and in the traditional academic hierarchy, there is an inverse correlation between status and "being in the trenches."

Many writing centers were set up originally to support classroom instruction in the composition sequence by providing additional drill, practice, ad tutoring. An argument often presented for writing centers says that one of their functions is to release valuable instructional time from the drudgery of drill and exercise. In some cases, particularly in basic writing courses, lab assignments in a writing center are a required course component. In other cases, faculty refer those students most in need of extra work, the students our colleagues sometimes call "basket cases." In either case, according to the division of labor in this support service model, students who work in writing centers are not realty peer tutors. Rather they operate as lab aides who administer various exercises and writing activities and thus free faculty to devote more time to the higher things in teaching writing. If this argument has been successful in explaining the role of the writing center, it is also a rationalization of the academic caste system. By the traditional academic hierarchy's scale of values, the writing center's time is less valuable than a faculty member's. Time is a commodity. and in the political economy of writing centers, undergraduates can most afford to spend time in the trenches, to wage the war with grammar and syntax.

To put it bluntly, students are a down-right cheap source of labor compared to faculty or paraprofessionals--a fact, I'm afraid, that has done as much to legitimize the use of undergraduates in writing centers as any of our educational theories. Students are a cost-effective solution to the problem of staffing the tutoring programs that have expanded in a time of tight money. This solution, however, has only led to another set of problems.

Students or staff: The issue of exploitation

Most writing center directors have had to face the argument from traditionalist colleagues that students are just not qualified, that they do not possess the experience and expertise to tutor other students. In many respects the support service model of writing centers accepts the logic of this argument by restricting tutors activities to helping other students negotiate grammar drills and the most basic kinds of writing problems. The tutors themselves often feel that they are not qualified to tutor. Beginning tutors especially are prone to anxiety about their ability to help peers learn how to write. Socialized by years of schooling, tutors have internalized many of the traditional academic hierarchy's values and notions of authority. When we use tutors as adjuncts to classroom instruction, we run the risk of reinforcing these traditional values and re-creating feelings of dependence on the faculty's authority.

When tutors provide lab practice as part of a division of labor in a writing course, they become implicated in the traditional hierarchical structures of academia. Not only are they underpaid for performing work that is essentially instructional in nature, but also they become in effect the agents of someone else's will, servo-mechanisms of the faculty. The exploitation that can occur unwittingly in a writing center is only partially an economic matter. (And I should note here that there is often little WPAs can do about economic exploitation because the pay scale for tutors, usually minimum wage or slightly higher, is set in many instances by work study programs and student employment offices.) Exploitation does more than underpay tutors. It also expropriates the product from the producer, alienating tutors from their own activity by making them part of a division of labor they neither design nor control. What's innovative and educationally promising about peer tutoring--the power of students learning together collaboratively--gets domesticated by the old order, and peer tutoring becomes simply a new way of supplementing the old business of instruction. Tutors confront tutees not as colearners, but as extensions of the faculty, identified with the traditional authority of the classroom instructor.

This identification can have serious consequences for the relationship between tutors and tutees. Students who are required to put in lab time are particularly likely to ascribe traditional kinds of authority to the tutor and to see the tutor in a writing center as a surrogate for the classroom instructor. At just the moment initiative should shift to the learners--when tutor and tutee invest authority to learn how to write in each other--the authority of the classroom, of course requirements, and of grades intrudes and confuses roles that should remain separate, that of tutor and that of evaluator. Linking tutoring to coursework, particularly in those courses where tutors report back to the classroom instructor on the tutee's progress, makes the tutor into a monitor, a representative of the instructor's authority to

evaluate. This, in turn, creates ambiguity about whose side the tutor is on, the student's or the teacher's, and about the role of the tutor, as an ally or an adversary. And when the tutor's role is ambiguous, the social distance between students--between tutors and tutees--will increase and undercut the power of the peer relationship. What gets lost is precisely this peer relationship, the shared status of being undergraduates, as the social matrix of collaborative learning where the tutor and the tutee arrive at their own mutual understanding of the process of learning to write.

WPAs and tutor training

If the support service model makes the tutor-instructor and the tutor-tutee relationship problematical, it can also affect the relationship between the director of a writing center and the tutors who work there. The tie-in between writing centers and writing courses produces business, tutoring sessions that can be counted in annual reports for deans and funding agencies to ensure the center's-and sometimes the director's--continuing existence. The task of WPAs, of course, is to provide a service, but the connection between lab and coursework is a delicate matter because it is potentially self-serving. External pressure for results can cast WPAs in a narrowly supervisory role, managing the staff that produces the service and tallying the body count. Too often this supervisory role has Ied WPAs to define tutoring in similarly narrow terms, as a job instead as a part of the tutor's undergraduate education.

Certainly there are job-related skills that undergraduates gain by tutoring--responsibility, a knack for working with other people, a feeling for the complexity and social dynamics of institutional settings. A supervisory relationship between WPAs and staff, however, can cause WPAs to overlook the most valuable resource of the tutors, their immersion in the activity of learning to write. The potential strength of peer tutors is not their mastery of grammar, usage, organization, or style but the fact that they, like their tutees, are learning to write. The experience of how we learn to write is often distant to faculty and difficult to reconstruct. WPAs need a sustaining educational connection to the turos, to bring their experience learning to write to consciousness and to maintain it as the central focus of a writing center. The best peer tutoring programs, such as those modeled on Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan, usually include a tutor training course for academic credit as a means to accomplish these goals.' But even in those circumstances where for some reason a tutor training course is impossible, and in the case of those students who have taken such a course and continue tutoring, WPAs can play a broadly educational role.

To make the tutors' education the central focus of tutor training, WPAs should put primary emphasis on the tutors' personal development as learners and writers rather than on their acquisition of tutoring techniques. Tutors need to write and to talk about the process of writing, the frustrations and rewards of turning thought into prose. The struggle tutors go through in their own writing can help keep tutor training sessions from becoming simply problem solving meetings where tutors learn technical skills--how to work an rhetorical strategies or dropped "-ed" endings. These techniques can be useful, but the danger is that the tutors will begin to look upon their tutees as walk-in problems that need to be solved, a view often held by the tutees themselves. It's easy for tutors to forget the emotional and intellectual

demands of writing and to seek quick results by correcting their tutees' errors in organization and grammar. If isolated from the tutors' own experience writing, training in pedagogical techniques will invariably produce a staff of mini-teachers set apart from their peers.

I would argue that it is in the best interest of WPAs to treat tutors as students, not staff, as a way to tap into their experience learning to write and to make that experience explicit to tutors and tutees. The tutors' increased awareness of how they write can help them transcend the clinical connotations of many writing centers. As peer tutors come to grips with the way they write and make that understanding available to other students, they become more than lab aids. The tutors' education in writing not only helps prevent their exploitation by providing an educational return for their effort, but also it creates the conditions for a writing center that mobilizes peer influence and develops the intellectual commitment it takes to become a writer. What peer tutors are best suited to do is neither teach other students how to write nor supplement faculty instruction with drill and exercises. Rather, peer tutors can best help their students become writers by joining with them as partners to inquire into the writing process and to find a common language to talk about writing.

The future of writing centers

Such talk about writing, moreover, has implications for the role of a writing center in the larger design of a writing program. The way WPAs organize students in writing centers offers an important measure of their program's sense of identity and purpose. As Ben W. McClelland notes, "What tutors do says who we are."(4) Writing centers that administer drill and exercises reflect one view of what's involved in learning to write; writing centers that provide a context for students to interpret their experience writing reflect a considerably different view. I suggest here, however, more than a theoretical argument about approaches to education-the support service model versus collaborative learning. I think the pragmatic issue of the simple survival of writing centers also may be at stake.

I think we have to recognize the fact that writing centers have been riding a larger trend in academic support services and that, despite the proliferation of writing centers in the seventies, this trend is reversible. Support services, after all, are creatures of what they're supporting: alternative institutions whose political economy relies in a sense on the failure of the official curriculum and traditional instruction. Alternative institutions in this regard are cursed by their birth: if instruction improves; if we no longer face the learning styles of non-traditional students; if the literacy crisis loses its power to attract funding, then we're deprived of many of the rationales we've used to set up writing centers and keep them going. For writing centers to become a permanent part of higher education, we're going to have to find arguments that go beyond the support service model and institutionalize practices accordingly.

The great educational promise of peer tutoring programs in writing centers is that they are based on practices already present, in the mutual aid and intellectual commitment of student peer-groups. What WPAs need to see is that writing centers may well be transitory phenomena if they're tied too closely to curriculum

and instruction. The contribution peer tutoring programs make enriches student culture by formalizing and sanctioning the practices of collaborative learning students have always engaged in. Looking ahead through the eighties and nineties. I think the future of writing centers rests on the power of peer influence directed toward learning.

Notes

[1]"Student Peer-Group Influence," in *The American College,* ed. Nevitt Sanford (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), pp. 469-88.

[2]*Liberal Education,* 64 (December 1987), 447-68.

[3]A suggested syllabus for training peer tutors appears in Kenneth A. Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).

[4]Personal correspondence.