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Investigating Peer Tutoring for Academic Writing Support in a UK University

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Abstract

This project outlines the rationale, design, and findings of a peer tutoring project in a UK teaching-led university. Three students received training and tutored their peers in academic writing. Qualitative data was collected from both peer tutors and tutees; quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire administered by the institution's Careers department. Findings include a positive effect on the tutors' self-perception of their own employability and understanding of the conventions of academic writing, along with positive feedback from students who received tuition.

Introduction

The Student Study Skills Centre (SSSC) at Bath Spa University (BSU), an innovative and well-respected 'teaching-led' university, offers learning development advice to the university community. The initial aims of the Investigating Peer Tutoring in Academic Writing (2009) project were to investigate the effectiveness and viability of a peer tutoring scheme in the SSSC; measure impact on students' employability; and identify potential benefits, challenges, and barriers involved in developing such a programme.

The project aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What role can peer tutoring in academic writing play in the Student Study Skills Centre?
2. What are the pedagogical implications/benefits of a peer tutoring in academic writing scheme?
3. What impact might a peer tutoring in academic writing scheme have on the employability of the University's graduates?

Because 'the term ''peer'' is now used to describe a variety of relationships in the context of teaching and learning' (Falchikov 2001: 1), for the purpose of this project, the term 'peer' refers to students studying at the undergraduate level at the same university. This project focused exclusively on academic writing because writing constitutes the primary method of assessment for most courses taught at the institution; as such, student requests for advice from the SSSC usually pertain to academic writing.

The university at which the project was conducted is a 'new' (post-1992, with full postgraduate degree-awarding powers granted in 2008), teaching-led university with an arts and humanities focus. As an experienced teacher of academic writing, formally educated as a peer writing tutor in Canada and as the Coordinator of the Student Study Skills Centre, I believed that the students of this university would benefit from the extra-curricular advice, training, and support that a peer tutoring scheme offers. In addition, with a sector-wide focus on the 'employability' of university graduates, I identified an opportunity for the peer tutoring project to develop students' knowledge of composition and pedagogy, as well as some practical skills that could transfer into teaching, lecturing, or other careers.

Furthermore, peer tutoring in academic writing is beginning to be practiced in other UK universities (London Metropolitan, University of the Arts London, for example) and a growing body of literature outlines the theories and practices related to peer tutoring of academic writing in the UK higher education context.

Literature Review

There is a large body of research relevant to peer tutoring and academic composition. From Bartholomae (1985), we learn the importance of socialising students into the context of higher education, and that they have a right to understand their audience and the ways in which knowledge is constructed and valued in 'the academy'. These ideas are also evident in Lea and Street's 'academic literacies' framework (1998), which argues for a comprehensive approach to teaching academic writing in the UK, with a focus on the role identity, power, and contexts play in student learning and communication.

Harris (1995) and North (1984) introduce scholars to the concepts of peer tutoring and the culture of the North American writing centre. For example, Harris argues that 'tutorial instruction is very different from traditional classroom learning because it introduces into the educational setting a middle person, the tutor, who inhabits a world somewhere between student and teacher' (1995: 27). When I train peer tutors, I remind them that it is not their job to mark or grade the writing that students share with them; in fact, it is against the principles of peer tutoring to offer opinions on the 'value' of student work. What is important is the *conversation*, where a writer's ideas can grow and develop or simply be articulated.

While Harris, North, Bartholomae, and other scholars introduce us to the world of academic communication and writing centres, writing tutor guides such as *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan 2002) offer advice on how to *be* a writing tutor. Chapter 1 of *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors,* for example, outlines what I consider to be the five most important rules for writing tutors:

> 1. Never write any part of a student's paper.
> 2. Never comment negatively to students about a teacher's teaching methods, assignments, personality, or grading policies.
> 3. Never suggest a grade for a paper.
> 4. Never criticise the grade a teacher has given a paper.
> 5. Honor the confidentiality of the tutoring relationship. (Ryan 2002: 1–5)

Awareness of these 'golden rules' can help writing tutors and developers convince sceptical colleagues of the value of peer tutoring (and indeed professional tutoring) and keep managers and tutors out of conflict with other departments by maintaining strict ethical standards.

Ryan's clear, concise guidance on how to begin a tutoring session advises tutors to 'give the student control of the paper' and 'sit side by side' (2002: 15) which relates to Harris' discussions of both body language and the power relationship (or lack thereof) between peer tutors and students seeking help with their academic writing. Finally, Ryan's explanation of the power of active listening, facilitation, and silence (2002: 17–22) helps distinguish 'tutoring' from 'teaching'. Educators outside of North America need to be aware, however, that the vocabulary in US writing tutor guides such as *The Bedford Guide* may need to be explained and adapted for local peer tutors.

Recent literature has begun to examine peer tutoring as a method for teaching academic writing specifically in the UK. In 2006 Devet *et al.* listed several 'concerns' about the adaptation of North American-style peer tutoring schemes in the UK higher education context. For example, they cautioned that 'lecturers' pay, status, and morale' (2006: 208) should be taken into consideration. In addition, Devet *et al.* express concern about student identity; they worry that assumptions that students are homogenous group might be false, thereby calling into question the idea that peer tutors are actually 'peers' to those they tutor (2006: 210–211). Devet *et al.* conclude that it:

> is probable that there will be contexts and situations in UK higher education where student writing can be developed by adopting a peer tutoring model; however, it is important for universities to match staffing models to localised curricular, pedagogic, and micro-political

> need. Additionally, we have to take account of national policy drivers and the ways in which these affect the local situation. For these reasons we argue that there are dangers in attempting to replicate the US peer-tutoring model in an unreconstructed form (2006: 211).

Those considering using peer tutoring should take into account Devet *et al.*'s concerns, particularly when trying to implement peer tutoring in writing in universities outside the North American higher education context.

Overcoming objections to peer tutoring

However, in his discussion of a peer tutoring scheme developed at London Metropolitan University, O'Neill (2008) takes issue with Devet *et al.*'s objections to peer tutoring schemes, pointing out inconsistencies in their argument and arguing that 'the authors underplay the real advantages of the student-student relationship' and that 'no serious objection to peer tutoring is cited'

O'Neill suggests that it 'may well be the case that an ideal [writing development] system would be made up of a combination of undergraduate peer tutors, learning development lecturers and professional writers in residence, all working together to offer the best possible support for a variety of student needs' (2008: 6) and that for 'real change to be made in the UK, we will need to show that attention to writing helps the learning experience of *all* students and that we are not simply asking lecturers to deal with the ''problem'' of weak writers, who some academic staff would doubtless prefer not to have to teach' (2008: 9).

As O'Neill points out, Devet *et al.* present two sides to the peer tutoring debate; the paper's American collaborators outline responses to objections to peer tutoring, and suggest educating colleagues about the realities of the tutoring session and the peer tutoring relationship, arguing that the goal is to 'develop writers' independence' (2008: 202), and that peer tutors do more student-centred work and rarely act as teachers in a tutoring session (2008: 202). Similarly, Falchikov explicitly responds to 'frequently asked questions' about peer tutoring schemes, but in the UK context (2001: 129), which has been helpful for me when designing the peer tutoring pilot project at Bath Spa University. While Devet *et al.* focus on the quality of the tutoring received, Falchikov addresses UK-specific concerns about society and standards. As a North American attempting to develop a peer tutoring scheme in a UK university, I found Falchikov's suggestions for overcoming resistance helpful in addressing my colleagues' initial concerns; her list of questions and responses introduced me to the culture, prejudices, and terminology that I might encounter while developing this project.

Project Methods and Activities

Preliminaries

The first phase of the research project involved ensuring that Devet *et al.*'s concerns were addressed in terms of the institutional approach to human resources. Labour union leaders and other relevant colleagues (e.g. the Head of Learning and Teaching) were consulted about the proposed hiring of students as peer tutors of academic writing. All relevant parties agreed that the employment of peer tutors using dedicated research funding did not compromise existing agreements between the university and the unions and was a suitable approach to the teaching of academic writing.

Recruitment and selection

Next, the peer tutoring positions were advertised via the University's internal student employment unit using a professional job description and person specification (see Appendix 1). Applicants were required to submit a Curriculum Vitae listing their educational qualifications and work experiences, a covering letter and a sample of their academic writing, which allowed the selection panel to evaluate applications against the person specification (see Appendix 2: Peer Tutor Application Evaluation). When choosing applicants, we looked for those who met the criteria and then narrowed the field based on the quality of the covering letter and writing sample.

Six applicants were chosen to participate in the interview stage of the selection process (see Appendix 3: Interview Questions). The questions were designed to measure the interviewees' level of interest in teaching academic writing (What is your interest in learning about academic writing pedagogy?/How might this job fit in with your future career aspirations?); their existing relevant skills

(What qualities, skills, and/or experience do you have that would make you a good peer tutor?); and their general employability (This post will require tutors to exhibit a high degree of maturity, professionalism, and responsibility. Please give us an outline and/or example of how you can meet this criteria). In addition, we asked each interviewee about some aspect of their application package that was relevant to the position (e.g. past employment, academic interests).

I asked a colleague from the university's Business Support Office to sit in on the interviews in order to provide a balanced perspective. I knew that my colleague's perception of interviewees would differ from my own, as we have very different backgrounds: I could assess the suitability of each applicant's academic ability and personality, while my colleague would look for traits such as professionalism and presentation. In addition, we deliberated over hiring 'mature' students (i.e. those over 21 at time of starting university), particularly due to Devet *et al.*'s concerns over the perceptions of the perceived 'peerness' of tutors, Bruffee's (1993) argument that the benefit of peer tutoring depends on that 'peerness', and research conducted on the relationship between student identity and writing (Ivanic 1998 and Lillis 2001). We decided to hire one mature student because approximately 30% of the institution's student body is classified as 'mature'. Tutors were paid in accordance with the nature of the position; the grading of the post was agreed upon with guidance and approval from the University's central Human Resources department.

Training

The three peer tutors submitted a Criminal Records Bureau check in order to be allowed to work with students and took part in the training offered. The training comprised the following elements over a period of approximately four weeks:

1. Self-directed reading (Bartholomae 1985, Devet *et al.* 2006, Emig 1977, Harris 1995, Murray 1972, Lea and Street 1998, and Ryan and Zimmerelli 2006),
2. Two face-to-face group discussion sessions,
3. Online discussion using the university's virtual learning environment, and
4. Observations of 1:1 tutoring.

Peer tutoring sessions

After the training was complete, each tutor led one to two observed peer tutoring sessions, and some tutors led further peer tutoring sessions as time and space permitted. Again, due to the short timeline of the project, I would have preferred the tutors to have conducted more sessions and/or provided an opportunity for two tutors to work together with small groups of students. One of the tutors reported that she learned so much from the feedback that I gave her from her first two sessions that she is interested in continuing to peer tutor, even as a volunteer.

Data collection methods

The research questions were answered by collecting data in several ways. First, each peer tutor completed a self-evaluation questionnaire with a member of the university's Careers department at the beginning of the project and again at the end; this measured their own perceptions of their 'employability' in areas such as entering the labour market, personal and interactive attributes, and sector-specific skills. In addition, the tutors participated in reflective-writing exercises on the virtual learning environment and in their own learning diaries. Tutors also received feedback on their 1:1 sessions from both me, and the students they tutored.

Findings

Feedback from peer tutors

The tutors involved in the project reported favourably on their experiences of the training and tutoring sessions, especially their learning about the conventions and expectations of academic writing, as well as transferable skills. The tutors also thought that their participation in the project would help their own writing improve.

Liam considered the project to be 'an overall success' and Alex reported his experience as a tutor as a 'positive one' and wished he 'could have had more time to put [his] learning into practice'. Alex also commented that he 'really hope[s] the tutoring at the university can be expanded, it is a really useful

programme that could help a lot of students get their marks higher.' Sarah struggled with her first tutoring session; she thought her main mistake was that [she] only looked at what the student asked [her] to look at and forgot to look at the piece holistically to see if there were any other problems and also thought that tutoring someone outside her subject negatively affected her abilities.

The peer tutors commented on the 'revelation' that there is no single style for academic writing and that the conventions vary across disciplines. Sarah commented that:

> In my experience […] it is far easier to tutor someone in your own subject. Essays are so different in other subjects and things that are vital to one subject are less important in other ones.

Alex explained how he addressed this issue:

> When tutoring someone else, the only way I can find to give people help in a subject I have no clue on, is to keep questioning the individual about what I think may be wrong, always asking 'Is that what your tutor expects?' or 'Is that what the assignment requires?' This way if it is wrong they can go and find out for sure, if they don't know already.

Feedback from tutees

Similarly, tutees felt that they learned about academic writing; one reported that she thought:

> peer tutoring will benefit most people and the meetings will be less formal and more relaxed […] I fully enjoyed it and left the meeting feeling positive about the future of my assignments.

Though Sarah worried about her first session, the student she saw felt the session was 'very good' and that 'some interesting points about the length of [her] sentences was a useful observation' and that it was 'very easy to communicate with Sarah'.

Employability results

The self-evaluation questionnaires revealed that the peer tutors felt they were able to offer more valuable and concrete transferable and specific skills to potential employers after taking part in the project. Collectively, the tutors reported a 35% increase in their own skills, confidence and attributes for employment, a 40% increase in their ability to analyse data and draw conclusions, and a 60% increase in their ability to 'juggle' several tasks at once.

Alex reported that his participation had 'helped [him] in [his] career path towards being a lecturer, as [he] now [has] real academic experience as a tutor'. Liam thought that 'the project has impacted on [his] employability in a positive way' and that in discussion with future employers his role as a peer tutor would demonstrate 'maturity, the ability to communicate effectively, and the trust and assurance [the project leader] had in [him].'

Discussion and Reflection

I agree with O'Neill's assertion that 'in practice, when a system is in place, the potential objections to using peer tutors disappear' (2008: 8). I would advise others considering developing a similar programme to understand the theoretical rationale for peer tutoring and to solicit advice from colleagues in other institutions. For example, being aware of the likely resistance to peer tutoring can be a prompt to thoroughly researching the pedagogical foundations, potential benefits, possible challenges and practical applications of such a scheme.

From a practical point of view, I suggest that peer tutoring schemes must be properly resourced in terms of time, money, and staff, to ensure that tutors are properly trained to maintain professional standards and provide an environment conducive to learning. In my own experience, space for confidential tutoring is important but can be problematic to secure, and financial resources to pay tutors appropriately can be difficult to find. From a pedagogical standpoint, those considering instituting a peer tutoring scheme should ensure that they understand how learners learn, the relevant

theories related to teaching academic writing, and be aware of the contexts (institutional and wider) in which the staff and students conduct their learning and teaching activities.

While the qualitative data collected from tutors' and students' reports is helpful in answering the research questions, I believe that in future more quantitative data might be more useful for persuading decision-makers about the value of peer tutoring; for example, a longitudinal study of student performance (grades), satisfaction, and/or retention could be suitable.

The comparison of the 'before and after' careers questionnaires did add to the validity of the data, and the coupling of the tutors' qualitative reports with this slightly more objective data offered triangulation.

The question of whether to provide 'generic' or 'subject-specific' help may need to be addressed, again according to both pedagogical and socio-institutional needs. While an argument can be made for either, those planning a peer tutoring scheme should consider their primary purposes: is the tutoring meant to help students with their academic writing or their understanding of subject-specific content? Each institution will need to answer this question accordingly.

In addition, there is a need for UK-specific guidance for peer writing tutors as these schemes become more prevalent in UK higher education. Though recent financial developments may have an effect on the development of new programmes and schemes, challenging times can also offer an opportunity for innovation as educators and managers reassess priorities and resource allocation. As the results of this project demonstrate, peer tutoring in academic writing can be an effective and relatively economical approach to developing learning and employability skills for both tutors and tutees.

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Appendix 1: Job Description and Person Specification

Post Title: Peer Tutor (Academic Writing)

School/Department: School for Development and Participation/ Student Study Skills Centre (SSSC)
Line Manager: Joelle Adams, Student Achievement Coordinator
Grade and Pay: Grade 5 (£10.18/hour)

Job Purpose:

This post is the result of a Teaching and Learning Research and Development project. Peer tutors will be trained to provide academic writing support to other Bath Spa University students; the sessions and experience will be monitored and evaluated by the Student Study Skills Centre and Careers department to assess the viability and effectiveness of peer tutoring for academic writing support.

Main Duties and Responsibilities:

- complete training programme provided by SSSC
- research fundamentals of academic writing pedagogy and practice
- observe 1:1 tutoring consultations
- conduct 1:1 peer tutoring consultations
- provide information and feedback to Careers and the SSSC about the experience of being a peer tutor

Additional Points:

- possibly contribute to the production and presentation of a scholarly paper.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Qualifications/Experience

Essential:

- 3rd year or postgraduate student
- experience writing for assessment at Bath Spa University (essays, reports, reflective writing, and/or dissertations, etc.)]
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Desirable:

Skills & Knowledge

Essential:

- basic knowledge of English grammar and punctuation

Desirable:

- good to excellent knowledge of English grammar and punctuation
- comfortable speaking in public

Personal Qualities

Essential:

- friendly and approachable
- willingness to learn and apply theories and practices of academic writing pedagogy
- confidentiality
- reliable

Desirable:

Special Conditions This post is subject to Criminal Records Bureau disclosure. Further information regarding this can be found on our website.

Appendix 2: Peer Tutor Application Evaluation

Candidate Name:

□ Covering Letter
□ CV
□ Academic Writing Sample

Year 3 or PG	Yes/No	Notes/Comments	Score
Experience writing for assessment			
Covering letter: explains what they can offer			
CV: well-presented, some relevant experience?			
Writing Sample: scholarly, organised, language			
TOTAL			

Interview offered?
Interview accepted?
Time and date:

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

A. Introduction
    a. Introduce interviewers and Centre
    b. Format of interview (intro, questions, opportunity for questions)
    c. About the job
        i. Training – directed and independent
        ii. Observations
        iii. Tutoring 1:1
        iv. Careers analysis
        v. Scholarship – contribute ideas for paper/presentation
        vi. Opportunity to go to conference

B. Questions
    a. What is your interest in learning about academic writing pedagogy?
    b. What qualities, skills, and/or experience do you have that would make you a good peer tutor?
    c. This post will require tutors to exhibit a high degree of maturity, professionalism, and responsibility. Please give us an outline and/or example of how you can meet these criteria.
    d. How might this job fit in with your future career aspirations?
    e. Questions specific to each candidate?
    f. Okay with getting CRB?
    g. 2 references?

C. Conclusion
    a. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about yourself that may help us in the selection process?

    b. Do you have any questions?

    c. When we will let them know/method of contact