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Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing: the Infectious Nature of Engagement

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Abstract

Students often struggle with writing as they are unaware of the process of writing and of strategies and skills to help them write well. They often focus on the product of writing rather than engaging with the process of writing. However, it is in the process of writing, and in the discovery of that process, that learning happens (Murray 1973, Emig 1977, Berlin 1982). It is thought that the inductive, non-intrusive model of student peer-tutoring practiced at the Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick, based on the model proposed by Ryan and Zimmerelli (2006), encourages students to engage with their own writing and learning in a non-threatening, approachable and positive manner. However, amidst the rising debate on what constitutes student engagement with learning, it is timely to investigate whether, and to what extent, the model used to train peer tutors in the Regional Writing Centre constitutes real and meaningful student engagement for those who peer tutor in the Centre and for the students they tutor.

Introduction

In her 2011 NUI Galway conference presentation, Lesley Gourlay (2011a) argued that terms such as 'student engagement' and 'student experience' are in danger of descending into empty catch-phrases. Gourlay's call for a measured look at the motivations that drive educators to appeal for meaningful student engagement and a more formative student experience gave us, the two Writing Consultants at the Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick, pause to reflect on whether our *Peer Tutoring in Academic Writing* module, the module we use to train the Regional Writing Centre's undergraduate peer tutors in writing, was satisfying some of the more critical criteria for what constitutes 'engagement'. In particular, we questioned whether that engagement led, or failed to lead, to a more formative, satisfying university experience for not only those students who took the module, but for those students with whom they eventually came in contact in their later roles as peer tutors in writing. This article explores the impact that this module is having on the peer tutors' engagement with their own writing processes, their learning, and their university experience, and examines whether the level of engagement of these tutors is being transferred to those whom they tutor. Following an overview of the term 'engagement' and a discussion of the model of peer-tutoring underlying the ethos of the Regional Writing Centre, the article outlines the module and reports findings from a study of peer tutors trained using this model and the impact that the module is having on them as writers and as peer tutors, and on the students they tutor.

Student engagement

The term *student engagement* is one that continues to draw the attention of those interested in developing student learning in higher education. Enhancing student engagement has become an ideal toward which many higher education institutions strive; indeed, the term features in many of the vision and mission statements of higher education institutions across the globe (Trowler 2010: 2). This is an unsurprising phenomenon given the value that is attributed to student engagement and its impact on student development, learning and success (Kuh *et al*. 2007, Kuh 2009, Trowler 2010), an essential condition, Tinto (2001) argues, for student retention. Alongside this intensified focus on student engagement, a closely related term, *student experience*, equally enjoys ever-increased institutional focus. Both terms emanate from the literature on quality in higher education, the latter term first appearing in a 1992 preliminary analysis of a national survey of four thousand students and staff in sixteen universities and polytechnics in the UK, undertaken as part of the Quality in Higher Education project (Harvey, Burrows and Green 1992). Seeking a set of criteria by which the quality of education could be measured, the research team concluded that the essential factor by which quality in higher education could be measured was through an assessment of 'the total student experience' (Harvey, Burrows and Green 1992: 1). Trowler (2010: 2) situates initial conversations on student engagement with Astin (1984), but acknowleges the proliferation of that conversation following Harvey, Burrows and Green. (1992).

However, as both terms became part of the repertoire of ideologies of many, if not most, third-level educational institutions (Coates 2005: 25, Harvey 2005, Little *et al*. 2009, and Sabri 2011b: 658), it was not long before those 'on the ground', teachers and students alike, began to respond to tensions that result from differences in the various historical, social and political contexts in which the terms might be situated. At first, terms like *participation*, *student experience*, and *student engagement* would appear to be reasonably straightforward, each having their equivalent in the everyday lexicon. However, upon closer examination, their meanings are anything but clear-cut. In 'The Tyranny of Participation? Critically Exploring Notions of Student Engagement', presented at the *Engaging Minds* conference[1] in Galway, Ireland, Gourlay (2011b) argued that, though seemingly 'benign', a term such as 'student engagement' is not so innocent after all, referring to it as a 'dirty snowball' that has picked up many different meanings over time. Different notions of engagement have emerged, and the term is often equated with other important terms such as *attendance*, *attention* and *participation* (Gourlay 2011b, McRae 2007, Trowler 2010: 5). Differentiating between the concepts of 'student experience' and 'engagement', remarking with reference to Cuthbert (2011) and Sabri (2011a) that a tension has arisen between the two terms, Gourlay (2011b) posits a representation of the student experience in which the student is positioned as client or customer, conceptualised as being 'no more than a quantitative summation of student surveys and managerialist evaluations' (Cuthbert 2011: 1 cited in Gourlay 2011b), alongside an equally uncritical conceptualisation of 'the student experience' as 'a single reified entity', a reduction of the cumulative student experience into a consensus that smoothes diverse individual backgrounds and histories, thereby 'silencing [...] *other* accounts of higher education' (Sabri 2011a cited in Gourlay 2011b, Sabri 2011b: 659, *italics* ours). As Sabri (2011b: 665) notes:

> 'The student experience', has become a mantra, apparently used to give students a voice and at the same time constraining that voice by isolating it from other voices around it, and from the complex environment that enables us meaningfully to interpret those voices.

[1] *Engaging Minds: Active Learning, Participation and Collaboration in Higher Education*, NUI Galway's 9th Annual Symposium and National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) 5th Annual Conference on Higher Education, 9–12 June, 2011, NUI Galway: http://www.nuigalway.ie/celt/conference/images/Conference/Call4Abs%202011.png

The concepts that serve to empower the beneficiaries are functioning to achieve the hegemony. The parallels with earlier critiques of 'participation' are striking, and Gourlay's 2011 presentation in Galway hints that these parallels should be kept in mind.

Cooke and Kothari (2001: 5) identified two main approaches to critiques of 'participation': 'those that focus on technical limitations of the approach' and 'those that pay more attention to theoretical, political and conceptual limitations'. Coates (2005, 2007), Harvey (2002, 2005) and Yorke (2009) might be seen in this paradigm as performing the re-examination of the methodological tools used to inform and thereby empower students by involving them in the process of learning. Though not questioning the politics or ideologies that motivate quality assurance instruments in the first place, Coates (2005: 26, 29) is nevertheless dissatisfied, as was Harvey (2002) before him, with the ability of then-current quality assurance procedures to adequately measure student learning. Coates (2005: 26, 29) concludes that quality assurance procedures in Australian higher education were limited by their failure to account for 'the processes by which students engage in their study', admonishing that 'there is too much emphasis on information about institutions and teaching and not enough emphasis on what students are actually doing.' He argues for the inclusion in quality surveys of not only information about the availability of activities that lead to high quality learning, but of information about how students engage with those activities (Coates 2005: 26). Without de-emphasising the role played by the institution and educators in the facilitation of the conditions that make engagement possible, Coates (2005: 26) nonetheless concludes that 'individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement, and primary focus is placed upon understanding their activities and situations', suggesting active learning and peer collaboration as examples of such activity.

Gourlay (2011a), in contrast to Coates (2005), might in Cooke and Kothari's (2001) paradigm be construed as more focused on the theoretical, political and conceptual limitations of student engagement, examining how these discourses and practices position institutions, educators and students, historically, culturally and politically. Gourlay (2011a) argues for 'a "constructively critical" stance towards the concept of student engagement to allow us to gain genuine insights into the many and varied forms of student engagement'. She argues that engagement and associated terms need to be used carefully and critically in order to be meaningful and valuable, noting that conceptualisations of student engagement that encourage students to become more active agents in their own learning process can sometimes operate within the same institutional context in which students are conceptualised and treated as a passive customers. The concepts are working against each other, creating an unnecessary tension.

This article aims to explore one means by which meaningful engagement can be enhanced by offering a case study of a peer tutoring in writing module in one third-level institution, the University of Limerick, in a way that enriches the total student experience. Peer-tutoring is at the heart of the Regional Writing Centre's activities. Undergraduate peer tutors are trained to tutor in the Centre by completing *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing*, an accredited module specifically written for this purpose. Our study inquires into the degree to which this module has engaged its graduates, but equally into whether their engagement is infectious, spreading to those whom they later tutor. Establishing what is meant by *student engagement* and identifying barometers to determine its presence, this article studies a particular case, the four graduates of the module in the 2009/10 academic year. Our data consists of testimony from coursework and module and teacher evaluations, along with end-of-semester feedback from graduates of the module. This data combines with the results of qualitative student surveys of the four 2009/10 module graduates to provide us with a rich data set. As with Brasington and Smeets (2009), this study gives tutors the opportunity to voice insights from their peer-tutoring experience, particularly in relation to engagement. It is our hope that from the richness of the data, we can make some measure of the degree of engagement of our peer writing tutors and gauge the sense of transference of their engagement to students they tutor.

Measuring Student Engagement

Given the concerns highlighted above by Gourlay (2011a, 2011b) and others, it is unsurprising that delegates at an EATAW 2011 conference presentation we gave (O'Sullivan and Cleary 2011), when asked to define student engagement in a think-pair-share exercise, offered a variety of definitions of the term engagement. The resulting discussion could have easily torpedoed our presentation had we let it continue unabated. It was obvious from the definitions offered that people, though sharing a singular concern, academic writing, still managed to bring differing contextual concerns and values to the discussion table. The exercise served to demonstrate a problem highlighted by Trowler:

> It is clear that the term 'student engagement' carries a number of quite diverse meanings. The danger is that people run the risk of talking past each other when discussing how to enhance student engagement within their institution, thinking they are talking about the same thing when in reality they are not.
>
> (Higher Education Academy 2010: 4)

For the purpose of this research, student engagement is considered to be 'concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution' (Trowler 2010: 3).

It is also important to clarify the model of student engagement upon which our understanding is built. The Higher Education Academy (2010: 3) identifies two models of student engagement, namely the *Market Model of Student Engagement (MMSE)* and the *Developmental Model of Student Engagement (DMSE).* The former focuses primarily on students as consumers and 'is based on neoliberal thinking about the marketization of education. From this perspective, student engagement focuses primarily on ensuring consumer rights, hearing the consumer voice and about enhancing institutional market position'. The developmental model, in contrast, 'locates students as partners in a learning community, and is based on constructivist notions of learning such as the co-creation of knowledge by learners and teachers. This perspective places greater emphasis on student growth and development and is primarily concerned with the quality of learning and the personal, mutual and social benefits that can be derived from engaging within a community of scholars' (The Higher Education Academy 2010: 3). Our intention is to promote the Developmental Model of Student Engagement because of its emphasis on constructivist learning, student growth and development and its concern for the quality of learning.

Finally, in seeking to establish whether and to what extent the *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module enhances student engagement, it is important to identify key features of this experience, which will serve to determine its presence. For engagement to take place, researchers have suggested that different key elements must be present, including the following features: active participation; collaborative learning; purposeful, challenging and transformative learning experiences; measurable, high-quality learning outcomes; consensual /democratic learning; and empowerment which encourages legitimacy and a sense of belonging (Coates 2007 and 2009, HEFCE 2008, Hu and Kuh 2001, Krause and Coates 2008, and Kuh *et al*. 2007). The features we look at in our examination of the evidence are features identified and advocated in the literature (Trowler 2010: 7–8) as forming the basis of the U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE):

- Active and collaborative learning opportunities;
- Participation in, and encounters with, challenging and enriching academic activities and other educational experiences;
- Co-creation of knowledge through formative communication with both peers and academic staff, allowing for challenges to the values that validate and legitimise some types of knowledge over others;

- Legitimatisation by a supportive learning community;
- Purposeful and transformative learning experiences that are measurable (through the realisation of high-quality learning outcomes) and that are transferable to the workplace.

The research we conducted into the effectiveness of our peer-tutoring module looked for signs of the three dimensions of engagement as identified by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004: 62–63 cited in Trowler, 2010: 5), namely, behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. Behavioural engagement corresponds with evidence of participation, either through attendance or involvement or contribution. Emotional engagement is marked by affect: signs of 'interest, enjoyment or a sense of belonging' (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris 2004: 62-63 cited in Trowler 2010: 5). Making sense of the activity, finding its relevance for one's self and being motivated by that relevance is indicative of cognitive engagement. Evidence of the five key features above was sought in our qualitative student surveys to establish the extent to which the *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module stimulates student engagement.

The Regional Writing Centre Case Study

Both theoretical and experiential evidence suggested to us that the University of Limerick Regional Writing Centre's *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module not only occasioned engagement that was formative, but actually served to propagate engagement, as if the practice was inherently communicable, catching. Evidence of this engagement will be examined with respect to the five key features highlighted above. Prior to examining engagement, however, it is important to establish the context in which the *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module operates and to outline the methodology employed to elicit data that would help to determine the impact this module is having on the peer tutors' engagement and to uncover if these tutors are inspiring this engagement in their tutees.

The ethos adopted in each of the Regional Writing Centre's peer-tutoring sessions and in our training of peer tutors is to ensure that students are encouraged to participate actively in each session. By adopting an inductive approach to tutoring, the peer tutor encourages and helps the tutee to be involved in his/her own learning. Together, the peer tutor and the tutee set an agenda for the consultation that is purposeful and challenging, and together they work to achieve these goals. The peer tutor is there to guide the tutee and to equip him/her with the strategic knowledge, including cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies, required to empower the tutee to become a better writer in a supportive learning environment. Following the consultation, the peer tutor and the tutee assess the outcomes of the session and, jointly, they decide if a further consultation may be required. In a successful session, the peer tutor and the tutee demonstrate signs of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. In theory, the conceptual framework that drives our Centre's ethos is one of engagement; the research reported in this article seeks to uncover if this is the case in practice.

Peer-tutoring in writing: theoretical and experiential evidence of engagement

A wealth of scholarship exploring peer tutoring in writing exists. Bouquet and Learner (2008) argue, however, that very little writing centre research is cited in other than writing centre-specific journals. We thought it wise, therefore, to distinguish between a fairly typical model of peer tutoring in US writing centres, the Ryan and Zimmerelli model (2006), and models such as the Keller system or Supplemental Instruction (SI) with which an international readership might be more familiar.

Topping (1996: 322) refers to peer-tutoring as 'a very old practice, traceable back at least as far as the ancient Greeks', and much of the US peer-tutoring model is based on many of the pedagogical practices of ancient rhetors: analysing the speeches of great orators to learn how they achieve their rhetorical goals, then applying similar strategies to one's own speech in order to further one's own goals. Decrying the exclusion of ancient rhetorical training such as 'memorization, imitation, contextualized grammar study, *praelectio*, *progymnasmata*, and so

on', Russell (1993: 195) suggests that writing instructors 'might look around us at what is working in other places and behind us at what has worked in other times, to find new possibilities for change in what we are doing now'.

Conceding the difficulty in defining peer tutoring, Topping (1996: 322) nevertheless identifies some unifying features, including *gains for both tutors and those they tutor*, *adopted roles for participants*, *attention to curriculum content* and *specific procedures for interaction*. In the peer-tutoring parlance of Topping (1996: 322), the Regional Writing Centre's might be described as fitting the 'dyadic, fixed-role peer-tutoring' model, though it can take other forms, depending on the circumstances. Students working on a group writing project, for instance, might come as a group to talk to one of our tutors about their plans for their assignment and their strategies for achieving their writing goals. The role of our tutors is *fixed* in Topping's terms in the sense that it is their session to control, but also in that it is understood that the tutor is a good writer, with good habits and a proven track record. Our peer tutors understand that they are chosen because they are good writers: people with healthy processes who employ strategies that work on emotional, cognitive and social levels and who are highly reflective and utilise their metacognitive awareness of their writing processes to develop strategies to achieve new goals for unfamiliar writing situations. It is this resource that they draw upon in tutoring sessions. It is from this resource that tutees learn to draw out strategies for achieving their own writing goals.

Topping (1996: 336–37) cites nine studies of peer tutoring in writing, five reporting on subjective feedback and four involving more statistically reliable data. Claims made about the benefits of peer tutoring for both the tutor and tutee include the development of metacognitive skills, improved cognitive processing, increased interaction/reduced isolation, more immediate feedback and prompting, lower anxiety, a higher level of disclosure and increased learner autonomy (Topping 1996: 324). Other claims include more immediate cognitive gains, improved retention, greater cognitive awareness, motivational and attitudinal gains, including 'greater commitment, self-esteem, self-confidence and empathy' (Topping 1996: 324). From the more objective studies specific to peer-assisted writing, deadline attainment, reduced failure rates and greater student efficacy are listed amongst the attributes reported.

There is, as Topping (1996: 322) outlines, a specific procedure for interaction, though the shape that the procedure takes is very much reliant on the writing situation with which the tutee presents and on how tutees respond to the writing tutor's questions. Topping (1996: 324) portrays a scaffolded 'exploration through social and cognitive interaction with a more experienced peer in relation to a task of a level of difficulty within the tutee's "zone of proximal development" [as] a theoretical cornerstone of peer assisted learning' (Vygotsky 1978). Most of the Regional Writing Centre tutors' time is spent eliciting information from student writers about their writing situation, where they are at in their research and writing processes and the strategies they employ in their efforts to manage their writing situation and to reach their writing goals. Our tutor's expertise is in knowing what questions to ask. 'How would I proceed if my paper were at this stage of development?', 'What would I need to know if this were my writing situation?' and 'What strategy would I use to achieve this writing goal?' would be questions that Regional Writing Centre writing tutors might ask themselves in their efforts to locate the questions that students need to answer so that they can proceed in a more orderly fashion toward the their writing goals. This procedure highlights the most essential component of the tutoring model we advocate: talk. Our peer tutor's number one job is to get students to talk about their papers.

Myhill and Jones (2009) provide a good overview of the theoretical justification for talking with others about writing and its role in developing metacognitive understanding and their study provides some evidence about how talk develops text. Ryan and Zimmerelli (2006: 28–31) are clear about some of the roles that writing centre tutors adopt: ally, coach, commentator, collaborator, writing 'expert', learner and counsellor. The provisos are that tutors begin by determining where the student writer is in his or her writing process, proceed from that point, and do not compromise the student writer's authority over the text. All authorial decisions should be those of the person being assessed on the writing. The main job of our tutors is to ask tutees the questions that good writers would ask. In this way, they model a writing process and a strategy development process. It is through this process of facilitation through

inquiry that tutors benefit, learning more about themselves as writers, and their own strategies and processes.[2]

The Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing Module

Established in 2007, the Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick is the first writing centre in Ireland. Since its inception, the centre has run a peer-tutoring programme in academic writing, peer-tutoring being at the heart of the Centre's activities. Central to our peer-tutoring programme is the goal of encouraging student engagement with writing and the writing process for both peer tutors and their tutees.

Peer writing tutor training programmes in the UK and Europe often amount to no more than a two-day induction (Brasington and Smeets 2009). However, we wanted to move away from short-term inductions when training undergraduate students to become peer tutors in our Centre. We felt that we had a greater burden of proof in defending the idea of undergraduate writers tutoring postgraduate writers. For undergraduates, therefore, peer tutor training is a more long-term engagement over the course of a semester. This is why undergraduate peer tutors are trained on the accredited module entitled *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing*.

The module's syllabus outlines a course of study that induces students to reflect on their own writing processes and strategies, and offers a structured, non-invasive approach to tutoring peers about writing. Through small group discussion and writing-focused workshops, participants engage in activities designed to facilitate both their development as writers and writing tutors. They develop an awareness and command of the meta-language used to talk about writing by talking about their own processes, reflecting on strategies planned for current, past, or even future, writing situations. This language becomes useful in tutoring situations as it offers tutors a way to organise their conversation, unpack and unfold their own experiences as writers and the experiences of those they tutor. The aim is that by engaging in this reflective, narrative process—talking about their writing, evaluating the strategies they employ in order to determine if those strategies are impelling them toward, or impeding them from reaching, their writing goals—they will become better writers.

Students of *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* meet for three hours a week. Class time is divided equally between lecture time, lab time and tutorial time, though an attempt is made to integrate the lecture material into the lab and tutorial hours, allowing for more interaction. During lab hours, students write—reflecting in journals or working on assigned reflective essays. During tutorials, participants role-play tutoring situations or discuss theoretical literature on writing centre practice. The syllabus also requires that students make appointments to sit with peer tutors in the Writing Centre, first as a tutee, then as an observer and, finally, as a co-tutor. Assigned writing includes three essays: one asking participants to reflect on how they were taught to write; another asking them to reflect on, and prepare to deal with, a tutoring situation about which they feel apprehension; and a third asking them to identify and justify their tutoring philosophy. Participants also produce a handout designed to help fellow students with some aspect of writing in their discipline. Assessment is continuous. Feedback on early drafts is given by us as the module's facilitators and by peers in scheduled peer-feedback sessions. All written work is redrafted for inclusion in a portfolio submitted the week after classes end, and is evaluated for both formal and conceptual features. Final assessment includes marks for participation. A final score of B1 or better warrants consideration for employment in the Regional Writing Centre.

[2] For more on peer tutoring in writing, see Graham, Harris and Mason 2006, Rizzolo 1982, and Topping 1996: 336-37. For more on the role of talk in peer writing tutor sessions, see Bruffee 1984, Gere and Abbott 1985, Gourlay 2009 and 2011c, Harris 1995, McCarthey 1994, Myhill and Jones 2009, North 1982, Simpson 1994, and Wells 1990. For more on writing tutor training see Beck et al. 1978, Bruffee 1980, North 1982, and Ryan and Zimmerelli 2006. For more on metacognitive development, see Bonds, Bonds and Peach 1992, Greene and Azvedo 2007, and Harris, Graham and Mason 2006.

The idea of qualifying peer tutors in this way has been well received by both students and staff. It is usually recognised that, even if the student writer were never to be employed as a peer tutor in the Writing Centre, they would benefit from the module by becoming more aware of themselves as writers.

Methodology

To test the notion that the module inspires a kind of infectious engagement with writing, we analysed qualitative feedback. Feedback on the effectiveness of the module existed in three years of journal reflections collected as part of student portfolios and from end-of-semester student module evaluations. Feedback from the formal Student Evaluation of Teaching conducted by the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning was also taken into account. In addition, the Regional Writing Centre devised a method of collecting anonymous feedback from students attending tutoring sessions.

In addition, we drafted a questionnaire and interview questions to elicit data that might be useful in determining the degree to which there was transfer, the extent to which the prospective tutors' engagement in the module communicated an engagement in the tutoring sessions and into minds, emotions and writing behaviours of tutees. Undergraduate tutors working in the Regional Writing Centre at the time of our investigation were asked to respond to a questionnaire and to, later, sit for a group interview. This data forms support for claims about the degree to which the module and its methodology promotes engagement well beyond the confines of the classroom.

As recommended in Coates (2005: 35), our inquiry relied on questioning subjects about what they do and their perceptions of how those activities impact on the quality of their learning. Surveys of student perceptions are common in UK and Australian quality reviews. Yorke (2009: 721) outlines the advantages of a questionnaire approach, in particular, in measuring student engagement: 'questionnaires have the added advantage of gathering data directly from students as primary units of analysis, of accessing information which may only be known to individual students and of providing students with an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their academic experiences while completing the form'. Petrić (2002: 11, 17) has reaffirmed our understanding of the complex influence of perceptions and attitudes over behaviours, reminding us that 'attitudes may influence the learning process in a significant way', but also that 'change in belief actually follows rather than precedes changes in behaviours'. When tutors ask students to engage in good writing practices, they are asking them to behave like good writers would, thereby creating the conditions in which change in attitude is possible. Our hope in poring through the qualitative evidence was that we would be able to learn something about the impact of the module on those who had completed it, in terms of their engagement with writing and the tutoring of writing. We also wished to discern from that evidence whether we could say with any confidence that our tutor's engagement had any effect on the engagement of tutees. Our thoughts were that, were we to find evidence from student testimony that the student's perceptions of their own learning was of a high quality and that there was some indication in the testimony of a shift in behaviour and attitude, we might be able to make the case that the *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module serves as a model of how to promote active, quality student engagement. This case would be further strengthened, we thought, if there were some evidence of behavioural or attitudinal changes in those they tutor.

The questionnaire designed specifically for this study and completed by the 2009/10 cohort, who had successfully completed the module and were working as peer tutors at the time, consisted of 15 questions, 14 of which were open-ended. Questions included, but were not limited to:

- What impact did the module *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing*, AW4006, have on your writing?
- Did the module change your writing process or attitude toward writing?

- In what ways have you benefitted most from working as a peer tutor in the Writing Centre?
- What impact has your one-to-one sessions had on your tutees?
- In what ways have tutees benefitted most from your sessions?
- In your eyes, what makes for a successful session? What is the one thing that you hope gets across to the mind of the tutee?

Follow-up interviews built upon these questions and answers, the format allowing for collaborative discussion. The tutors were asked about the impact of the module on them as writers, and about the greatest impact of the tutoring experience itself on any aspect of their lives. Tutors were asked about changes to their approach to, and attitudes toward, writing, about what they passed along to others, about how they measured the learning of those they tutor and whether they could recall tutoring strategies that were especially effective, about the relationship the tutors have with tutees, and whether the time they have spent as tutors in the Centre was time well spent.

Signs of engagement

The features we looked at in our study are those identified as being indicative of engagement (Trowler 2010: 7–8). Evidence comes in the form of the words and perceptions of those tutoring and those being tutored. There were four tutors drafted into the Writing Centre from the graduates of the Spring 2010 module. All four had completed the questionnaire in Spring 2011, but only three were available for interview.

There were ample instances of testimony that spoke to the active and collaborative nature of both the learning experience and the subsequent tutoring experience. On the questionnaire, when asked how their approach to tutoring compared to what they thought they would be doing in the sessions before taking the module, one tutor answered: 'I thought it would mostly be me telling the student what they needed to change and how to do it […] while in truth, in my role now, it is not like that at all [...] I only direct them. They do all the work'. Another tutor said that they 'realise[d] the importance of letting [the tutee] speak, and for them to keep control of their work'. When asked what made for a successful session, one tutor replied: 'A lot of talking (preferably from the tutee). That they get a clearer picture of what to do next with their assignment'. During the interview, one tutor told a story about a female student who had come seeking help with her Final Year Project (FYP) paper. The tutor related how she noticed a problem that was familiar. When she had been working on her own FYP, she had come into the Writing Centre for help and the tutor had responded as a reader, telling her how frustrating it was that the significance of the quotes were not explained, that they did not support the argument because their significance was not explained. Now, she was seeing the same problem in this student's paper and responded similarly, crediting the original tutor that she had seen when she was doing her own FYP. 'So that's one thing that I passed onto that girl', our tutor said, 'and I think it really helped her. The next paragraph, I let her change it and do it herself, and she made it more argumentative and used her critics [...] to better advantage really'. 'You learn from students as well', another tutor later added. 'Through discussion, when you're actually talking to tutees in the session, you learn from them'.

In the answers to questions in the questionnaire, there are indications that the tutors have come to see writing as a more challenging, enriching academic experience. Their attitudes toward writing have changed. 'I don't avoid doing my essays as now I feel a sense of achievement when they are completed', said one tutor. Another said:

> I no longer avoid my essays. I like writing now. I see it as a step-by-step process and not a daunting task. I prefer doing essays before the deadlines now so I can have plenty of time to edit and redraft. I like the feeling of achievement when I know I can submit something I have worked on rather than something I have thrown together in a hurry.

In answer to questions about their feelings about their experience of tutoring in the Writing Centre, all said that they loved doing it, reflecting on the satisfaction of being able to be helpful to others.

In the interview, all of the tutors debated the degree to which the tutoring sessions were challenging or enriching for students who came in to the centre thinking the work would be done *for* them. But when speaking about those who learned from their experience of the tutoring session, they were much more definite in their estimation of the enriching nature of the tutoring process, for both the tutor and the tutee. '[I] feel more comfortable in challenging situations now,' one tutor told us. Another tutor described a student who had come in not knowing what was wrong with her paper. There were problems, the tutor relayed, with coherence between what was said in introductions and what was concluded at the end of the paper. The student had come in several times, '[...] and by the end of it, when she came in, I was like, why are you here?' The tutor told us that she asked the student to show her the outline of the paper and to identify her thesis and assured her that she was doing well and did not need to come in to have her paper checked, that she was able to do it on her own. Not only was the student able to do it on her own, she was able to apply her skills to two papers for different disciplines, English and History.

The co-creation of knowledge requires a balance of power, mutual respect and openness to the ideas of others. Even when people differ, being heard, legitimising one's difference, can be empowering. Writing tutors communicate with tutees, and there are innumerable instances of peers coming to a consensus. For instance, during the interviews, one of our tutors talked about how she learns from those she tutors. When a writing problem is outside of a tutor's experience, it is up to the tutor to work with the tutee to come up with a strategy that can be expected to be successful in the tutee's writing context. The tutors also encourage students to engage with their teachers. If assignments are unclear, students are advised to return to teachers to clarify. The teacher, too, is part of the writing context. Acknowledging the lack of clarity in an assignment legitimises the tutees' perceptions of a problem. Returning to the teacher for clarity is a behaviour that is empowering because the student is the agent in resolving the problem.

The opportunity to challenge ideas and methods is not only empowering and formative, it is legitimating, another condition identified as essential for student engagement to take place. Tutors many times expressed their own sense of legitimisation from their experience as a peer tutor, but also conveyed evidence that tutees felt legitimated. Earlier, a story was told by one of our tutors about a student who initially had difficulties, but after a few sessions the tutor had wondered why she had returned. Our tutor went through her paper with her, asking her to identify all of the features we usually see as being necessary to a coherent, argumentative paper. Through this method of inquiry, it soon became apparent to this student that she had the tools she needed to write a good paper. The tutee was legitimated by the process. In the questionnaire, when asked what a successful session would look like, one tutor responded: 'A successful session for me would be where the tutee leaves the Writing Centre with a smile and a little less worry on their face. I hope that their attitude to writing has changed, and they are more aware of what makes a good essay'. Clearly, tutors feel legitimated by tutees' responses. Another said, 'I love when you know you have helped someone and they are leaving feeling more confident and informed. I like that I got to meet lots of people from all disciplines and learn from their styles'. Similarly, another tutor expressed satisfaction knowing that 'the tutee leaves feeling like they can approach any essay in the same way and overcome the problems they were having previously'. This idea of giving student writers the tools that they needed to deal with any writing occasion was reiterated several times during the interview:

> [...] you're just giving them a kind of toolkit, and it's a toolkit they can apply to all their essays, so when they leave here they feel kind of confident, not just that they can improve this paper, but confident of their style overall.

The legitimisation of the tutor's role was best expressed by one tutor when she described the sense of belonging she now experienced as a result of working in the writing centre: 'You're also like a full-time employee of UL (University of Limerick [...] it makes you feel more part of

the scene'. Feedback from tutees testifies to the legitimising effect of the tutoring process for them. In the open feedback section of the form, approximately eighty per cent of the respondents volunteered that they left their sessions feeling greater confidence.

Finally, there was an abundance of indicators in the feedback from both the questionnaire and the interview that both the module and the tutoring experience were purposeful, transformative learning experiences. Only one tutor suggested that those two experiences did not lead to a change in her process. Others said that the experiences had completely changed their process and their attitude to writing. 'I feel more at ease with writing now', one said. 'It doesn't scare me as much as it used to'. Another said, 'I strongly feel the Writing Centre also played a huge role in my progression as a student'. Suggesting that the transformation is measurable, one tutor testified that s/he had 'gone from being a B student to an A student, of which I am very proud and grateful'. This is a claim that also appeared in the responses to the end of semester evaluation forms. We looked at student's grade transcripts to verify the claims, and saw that most of the tutor's grades in their degree course modules improved by a letter grade in the year following their participation in the module. Two tutors, during the interview, suggested that their experience with the module and as a peer tutor would be of benefit later. '[My experience] has provided me with valuable skills that are applicable to any workplace,' one tutor said. Another tutor spoke about a job she had applied for as a TEFL teacher in Japan. She thought, for certain, that her experience in the Centre would benefit her greatly.

Conclusion

Although, at the outset, the *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module was introduced as a means of training and legitimising undergraduate peer tutors in the Regional Writing Centre, the research presented herein provides evidence of the sound pedagogic reasoning underlying this model. It is clear that the peer tutors perceive that their work is having an important impact on their own student engagement and that this engagement with writing is, in some cases, being transferred to their peers. The peer-tutoring approach adopted by the Regional Writing Centre is proving to be an appropriate pedagogical approach to the development of writing in our context.

This form of undergraduate training would appear to foster a transformative learning environment for the tutors and their peers, with peer tutors reporting instances of how they and their tutees have participated in active and collaborative learning opportunities, how they have encountered challenging and enriching academic activities and experiences, how they have been involved the co-creation of knowledge, how they and their tutees feel legitimated by the activity and the experience and, finally, how they have participated in purposeful and transformative learning experiences that are of a high quality and transferable to the workplace. In addition, the *Peer-tutoring in Academic Writing* module is providing the Centre with well-trained undergraduate peer tutors in writing in a cost-effective manner. The module and tutoring practice allow undergraduates to participate in the perpetuation of the dialogue on writing in our institution, which has, until recently, been lacking. Our tutors are nurturing expertise in writing right across the institution, whilst also fulfilling the University's important strategic goal of enhancing the student experience—both for themselves and for the students they tutor.

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