Fighting for Peer Tutoring in Writing: Learning How to Respond to Scepticism

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Abstract

Scepticism about peer tutoring in writing expressed by university members outside the writing centre is a common problem for staff at several European writing centres. Our workshop at the 2009 EATAW conference focused on this issue by testing a short training to prepare writing centre staff for discussions with sceptical faculty members who reject peer tutoring.

This article explains the procedure of the workshop and, as a result of the workshop, gives a compilation and categorization of the pro and con arguments and demonstrates possible answers to typical statements of doubt. It is shown that counter-arguments stem from very different levels of argumentation. There are strategies of how to respond to these arguments, though it will be a great challenge to develop guidelines for argumentation that match the very different institutional conditions of different academic cultures, as they were represented in the workshop.

Introduction

As former peer tutors at the Berlin Institution of Technology and as writing centre staff at Göttingen University and the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), we noticed that there is much scepticism around faculty members concerning writing support in general and especially writing support in the form of peer tutoring. We decided to make this scepticism about peer tutoring into the focus of a workshop at the 2009 EATAW conference, titled 'Fighting for peer tutoring in writing: learning how to respond to scepticism'. The main reason for giving a workshop on this topic was that while this problem certainly exists at universities and writing centres in Germany, we learned at former international conferences such as EATAW 2007 and EWCA 2008, that we share this kind of experience with writing centre staff from all over Europe. Since peer tutoring and peer learning do not seem to be as established in many European higher educational systems unlike in the US (for historical reasons for the wide acceptance of peer learning and peer help in US education, see Devet *et al.* 2006), it is a topic of wide interest. It is especially important, as university staff who do not believe in the benefit of peer tutoring (and are therefore unlikely to support it, financially as well as ideologically), can be a real obstacle to the establishment of this model of writing support. In discussions with writing centre colleagues, we noticed that there is a wide range of arguments against peer tutoring, from questioning the skills of students as tutors to supposing that peer tutoring might lead to plagiarism. When talking about this topic, many colleagues from German writing centre networks said that they sometimes find it very hard to respond to such sceptical statements.

The questions which led us while planning and conducting the workshop, and which we try to answer in this article are: How can we deal with such scepticism? How can we respond to objections in order to create a safe ground for establishing peer tutoring programmes at European universities? In conducting a workshop around these questions we pursued a couple of different goals: Firstly, we were curious to hear what members of other educational systems had to say about their experiences and we thought it would be helpful to share these experiences and even suggestions for solutions, in

order to learn from each other. Secondly, we wanted to know if it was possible to develop a guideline of pro and con arguments for institutions all over Europe that plan to set up peer tutoring programmes, or struggle to defend their programmes. Thirdly, we wanted to conduct the workshop in order to create and test a short training session for writing centre staff in which participants generate and reflect on arguments in favour of peer tutoring and exercise their use in a discussion. In this way, the workshop served as a kind of experiment: We tested the assumption that similar arguments to defend peer tutoring are useful for writing centre staff all over Europe, as well as our belief that dealing with this kind of scepticism can be taught and practised. Of course, we did not test these theses in a quantitative standardized way, but rather a way of checking if there is any truth in these assumptions (which then may later be tested in subsequent research). Our approach was oriented at qualitative methods, aiming at getting an insight into the participants' perspectives and ideas.

In this article, we would first like to clarify our understanding of the term peer tutoring, which we also did at the beginning of the workshop. We will then give a short overview of the course of the workshop, and later discuss the results that came out of the workshop discussions, regarding different levels of arguments, as well as our leading questions mentioned above.

Defining 'Peer Tutoring'

At an international conference such as EATAW we expected our workshop participants to be members of a variety of different academic cultures. Due to the fact that the term 'peer tutoring' might imply different connotations in different academic cultures,[1] explaining our understanding of the term at the beginning of the workshop seemed necessary.

We, as former peer tutors who learned the basis of peer tutoring in training inspired by US models,[2] see peer tutoring as a consulting service in which students help other students with their writing projects. A peer tutoring session proceeds without any order from a person higher in rank than the other. This implies that both participants in a tutoring session are equal partners (Kruse and Ruhmann 2001: 21). The basis for this is the idea of collaborative learning, influenced by social constructivist approaches: collaborative learning assumes that individuals develop knowledge by interacting with other individuals and by sharing experiences and ideas (Bruffee 1973: 636). According to Bruffee, peer tutoring is a very good method to encourage this way of learning and can be understood as 'a way of involving students in each other's intellectual, academic and social development' (Bruffee 1978: 447). Further, peer tutoring follows a non-directive or client-centred approach (Rogers 1942), which means that the needs of the tutee are central in the tutoring session and that the tutor accepts the tutee, wherever she/he is within her/his writing process and whatever her/his needs may be. The non-directive approach also includes certain conversational techniques helping the tutor to guide the tutee to decide for him/herself instead of giving him/her direct advice. Assigning an active part to the tutee and placing the responsibility for the text on them is, in the context of tutoring writing, also known as 'minimalist tutoring' (Brooks 1991: 1).

The peer tutor is always a fellow student. However, peer tutors have been trained to tutor writing and are qualified to give adequate and productive feedback on texts, to answer questions on academic requirements, to make suggestions about how to structure the writing process, and how to enhance the text's quality. The role of a peer tutor is neither to teach academic requirements, nor to mark or to correct students' texts. Instead, the peer tutor helps students by asking questions about their writing projects and by giving feedback (Kruse and Ruhmann 2001: 21).

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[1] For example, in the US academic context, the term tutor refers to a person who gives advice in a one-to-one-tutorial, while in the UK academic context, a tutor is usually a person conducting an academic seminar (Ganobcsik-Williams 2006: xv)
[2] At the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg (Gerd Bräuer) and the European University Viadrina (Katrin Girgensohn)

Workshop Method

The group of workshop participants consisted of about 25 persons from a variety of mainly European countries such as the UK, Denmark, Austria and Germany. Although we did not specifically ask them about their professions, from their statements we concluded that they held different positions in different educational and academic systems, working as peer tutors, writing centre staff or teachers of academic writing.

The first part of the workshop was used to generate arguments. In a group activity, participants brainstormed on possible arguments in favour of peer tutoring as a model of writing support. The collected arguments were used in a subsequent role-play in which participants pretended to respond to sceptical faculty members. For the role-play, we asked three workshop participants to play faculty members who are doubtful and argue against peer tutoring in writing. Another three participants were to play persons who favour peer tutoring and who want to set up peer tutoring at their university. The participants who played the persons in favour of peer tutoring were supposed to use the arguments collected in the brainstorming. For the participants who played the sceptical staff we had prepared some typical arguments against peer tutoring. However, during the role-play both sides came up with new arguments. Afterwards, we discussed and evaluated the experiences with the participants. We started this by asking initial questions. The participants within the role-play were asked how they felt and what had made them feel secure or insecure during the discussion. The other participants, who had watched the discussion, were asked what had struck them and what arguments they had found convincing. A common observation of the discussion within the role-play was that the opposition was very strong and had good arguments, but that in the end the side in favour could convince them. Although participants agreed that the role-play was quite helpful for their own writing centre work, it was hard for those who had to argue against peer tutoring to stick to their role because most were already convinced by the concept of peer tutoring, as became clear at the beginning of the workshop. We concluded the workshop with a more general discussion about what is important to consider when arguing in favour of peer tutoring.

Results

As a result of the group work, of the role play, and of our own thinking before and after the workshop, we amassed a great collection of pro and con arguments which we tried to categorize and link with each other. Table 1 shows these results.

Table 1: Categorization of arguments

Counter-arguments	Pro arguments as possible answers
#1 Arguments that question the peer tutors' expertise:	
Peer tutors are only students. They are not qualified to tutor writing.	Peer tutors are qualified to tutor writing as they usually have received instruction and gained knowledge about peer tutoring before starting tutoring. Furthermore, they are supervised by a person with experience in tutoring writing.
Peer tutors might teach something incorrect.	Peer tutors do not teach; they show steps to solve problems.
Peer tutors cannot keep a professional distance from their tutees.	There are clear rules for tutoring. Well-trained peer tutors know these rules and also know how to keep a professional distance towards the tutee, even though they may show sympathy.
Students do not take peer tutors seriously.	Peer tutors can do good work because of their role as a peer of the tutee. Talking to a peer can make the tutoring situation easier for the student.
#2 Arguments that question the tutoring's benefit (closely related to the first category):	
Peer tutors do not know the standards of every single subject. Therefore they cannot help.	Peer tutors do not have to know all the different standards (e.g. of citation styles) of their university as they do not teach but help. Yet, after some

	experience in tutoring writing, peer tutors will themselves learn a great deal about the different standards at their university.
A peer tutor cannot tutor a student from another subject. If you do not understand the content of an assignment and of the subject, you cannot give feedback on an assignment.	Peer tutors are able to tutor students with subjects different from theirs because they help the tutee with the process of writing, not with the content. Furthermore, it is often a good exercise for a student to explain his or her topic to a student who is not familiar with his or her subject.
Peer tutoring in writing? That sounds like proof-reading.	Peer tutors do not correct mistakes, they usually do not tell the tutee what is wrong and what is right, and neither do they interfere in the content of the tutee's texts. Instead, they make suggestions about the student's writing and give feedback.
It does not help students to talk about their writing process, because what causes them trouble is the content of an assignment or the discipline-specific language.	Many of the problems students face in writing are problems of the writing process (also problems that look like problems within the text), which can be solved by talking to a comprehensive and sympathetic peer.
Tutoring in writing is for students with serious writing problems, who often have psychological problems. Peer tutors cannot handle these kinds of problems.	Peer tutors do not need a degree in psychology as most writing concerns are not based on psychological issues. Furthermore, peer tutors learn how to detect psychological issues and how to tell the tutee where in the university to seek help for these.
#3 Arguments that question the need for help in writing:	
I earned my degree without any help in academic writing.	Students do need tutoring writing for at least two reasons: Firstly, academic writing is neither taught at school nor in university classes. Secondly, feedback on written texts and communication about writing assignments are necessary for successful writing.
Students do not need writing tutoring because they learn writing at school.	
#4 Arguing on an economic basis:	
There is no money to pay for peer tutoring.	Peer tutors can actually save money: students who drop out of university or need a very long time to study because they fail in their writing projects are much more expensive to taxpayers and to universities than the work of peer tutors is.
#5 Questioning the legitimacy of peer tutoring:	
Students have to write their assignments (or papers) independently, without any help.	The writer him-/herself is always the one who is responsible for his or her text; peer tutors know that and explain their role to the tutee.

What became clear during this discussion, and is shown in the table, is the fact that arguments against peer tutoring can be located on different levels: some result from a misunderstanding or a wrong understanding of the term 'peer tutoring' (especially those demonstrated in the first two categories), some are based on plain economic issues (category #4), and others can be quite emotional when it comes to personal experiences, as seen in category #3. An interesting observation that came up during the discussion is that many of the arguments listed in Table 1 may result from some kind of fear: peer tutoring as a quite new and revolutionary concept of student support can be seen as a threat to the established academic teaching system and to those who are part of it. That is, some university teachers might be afraid to lose importance, or even their jobs, once there are new ways of supporting students. The only way to confront this objection is probably to demonstrate that peer tutors do jobs different from those of teachers, or, as Devet *et al.* put it 'the work of peer consultants complements that of professors' (2006: 202).

In the discussion, there were also some very useful comments about the general approach of responding to scepticism. The many arguments that are mainly based on a false understanding of

'peer tutoring', show the need to explain the role of a peer tutor, and also the role's boundaries, to those who are not familiar with this concept. Within the workshop, we came to the conclusion that it is not only essential to define the term 'peer tutoring', but that it might be also very helpful to offer some theoretical background on the topic. Explaining the theoretical framework of peer tutoring (e.g. the concept of collaborative learning, as mentioned in the introduction to this article) will hopefully lead to more acceptance of this concept with university members. It might also help to be able to quote some of the research that confirms the effectiveness of collaborative learning (for a review of research see Lunsford 1995 and McAndrew and Reigstad 2001) and peer feedback on text, such as Mendonca and Johnson (1994), Cumming and So (1996), Berg (1999) or Min (2006).

Participants also mentioned the fact that peer tutors themselves should know the theoretical framework for their work and should be able to explain it to university staff. Attaining this knowledge and the ability to react to sceptical questions should therefore be part of peer tutor training. It was noticed as well that mentioning the scientific community in the field of teaching academic writing, in which the work of peer tutors plays an important role, can also help to underline the good reputation of peer tutor work. Referring to professional organisations and conferences such as those of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) and the European Writing Centers Association (EWCA) might be a good means of support.

Conclusion

Considering the questions we had in mind when planning the workshop, we conclude the following: There are similar experiences regarding this topic and the arguments participants collected during the initial brainstorming were like those we had thought of before the workshop. It was obvious as well that most participants were familiar with the counter-arguments that we brought up in the role play. Therefore, as a lot of participants confirmed after the workshop, exchanging ideas and experiences about the topic is helpful. Nevertheless, one important point in the concluding discussion was that different academic cultures will probably have different arguments against, and in favour of, peer tutoring. In academic cultures where collaborative learning and peer review are a well known part of higher education, as in the US and, to a lesser extent, in the UK (Devet *et al.* 2006: 202, 207), convincing other faculty staff of the effectiveness of peer tutoring will probably be an easier task than in those European countries where the idea of peer tutoring is rather new. An answer to the question of whether it is possible to develop a general guideline for arguing in favour of peer tutoring would thus be: The table in this article might be used as a basis for such a guideline, but needs to be modified and/or extended according to the individual institutional surroundings. The question of how to deal with doubts about the benefits of peer tutoring cannot be fully answered by this one workshop, but it still became clear that reflecting on arguments in favour, as well as on counter-arguments with their possible roots and potential answers to them, is a good way to prepare oneself for discussions about this topic. Using role play as an exercise can be useful as it helps staff to practise not only which arguments to use but also how to use them. The observers can give feedback on the participants' persuasiveness and make suggestions for improvement.

We would like to encourage writing centre staff to use some of these ideas for their peer tutor training as we believe that defending and arguing for this model of writing support might be an important issue at a lot of universities. Those who would like to conduct this workshop or parts of it at their institutions are very welcome to contact us in order to obtain material or further information. We hope that the discussion about this topic will continue, maybe including a closer look at typical objections against peer tutoring in different academic cultures and educational systems. Since there were no participants from the US, it would also be interesting to exchange experiences and possible solutions with US writing centre members, who seem to be in a completely different position regarding the acceptance of peer tutor work.

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