

THE PEER PERSPECTIVE AND UNDERGRADUATE WRITING TUTOR RESEARCH

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As a tutor, you are now engaged in this professional activity. Happily, it is a collaborative and friendly profession, one that welcomes members at all levels—peer, graduate, professional, administrative.—Ryan and Zimmerelli (102)

As I considered how to open this essay, I was re-reading Ryan and Zimmerelli's *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and came across the passage above, which prompted me to think about how my "membership" in this profession has moved through three of the four "levels" they refer to (peer, graduate, and administrative) and has positioned me differently each time in relation to student writers. As a graduate student, I was growing into the role of writing instructor that allowed me an insider's perspective into "what teachers want" from student writing, a perspective I gladly shared with student writers, hoping that my emerging expertise would add to my existing toolbox of tutoring techniques. Later, as a director, my relationship with students shifted; my focus became the "bigger picture" issues—recruiting thoughtful, responsible consultants, making the writing center more accessible to students who historically would not have sought help in the center, and so on. Gone was the hybrid insider/outsider perspective that I had enjoyed as a graduate consultant. But before I worked in the center during my graduate years, and before I held administrative positions as a doctoral student and later as a faculty member, I was an undergraduate peer tutor, and my relationship with students was that of a fellow student writer, nothing more. Or at least that's how I described myself to student writers.

Because of the nature of my position as a Writing Tutor, I was some kind of authority in the eyes of the first-year writers who were required to spend three hours per week in the Developmental Studies Writing Lab where I worked. International students might even have called me a "teacher," a misunderstanding I dutifully corrected. But even at that time, when I claimed no more expertise in writing except the expertise that comes to any writer who practices the craft, I knew I was developing a perspective that was unique among undergraduates, a "peer-but-more-than-peer" perspective. Years later, as a director, I began to wonder how much we cultivate, with intent, the

unique perspective of our undergraduate peer tutors. To what degree do we enable tutors to take advantage of the peer perspective in ways that contribute to their own tutoring practice, to their local writing centers, and to the discipline as a whole? In this essay I argue that not only are peer writing tutors professionals, but they are uniquely-positioned professionals in writing centers who inhabit an ephemeral "peer perspective" that has the potential to contribute much to undergraduate writing tutor research and to the body of writing center scholarship. To illustrate, I end the essay with examples of tutor research that show the peer perspective serving as a unique lens through which tutors identify opportunities for interesting writing center research, follow through with that research, and enact change in local tutoring practices and centers.

A Brief Overview of Tutor Research and Scholarship about Tutor Research

While undergraduate peer writing tutors have been publishing in *Writing Lab Newsletter's* Tutor's Column and presenting their research at conferences such as the Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing for thirty years (see Fitzgerald for a useful history), only recently has the discipline recognized in peer writing tutor research (just "tutor research" from this point forward) how very unique and valuable tutor research is in higher education. Perhaps the relatively recent emergence of additional national venues for publication and presentation of tutor research—including the journal *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, the special undergraduate research issue of *The Writing Center Journal* in 2012, and, beginning in 2010, the undergraduate research poster venues along with undergraduate research panels at the Conference on College Composition and Communication—has focused the profession's attention on tutor research as a legitimate and valuable contribution to knowledge-making in composition and rhetoric. Tutor researchers are moving beyond the reflective essays that are common in *Writing Lab Newsletter's* "Tutor's Column," which historically have served as a valuable entry into scholarly publication for peer tutors.

Particularly impressive are tutor researchers who keep pace with their graduate student and professional colleagues and publish either independently or in collaboration with more experienced scholars. Tutor researchers present and publish on an array of topics that are comparable to the topics investigated by established writing center scholars: efficacy of peer writing tutor pedagogy (Raymond and Quinn), writing centers as contact zones (Baker), the intersection of race/ethnicity and tutor identity (Varma), the disconnect between tutoring practice and big-t Theory (Doucette; Reger), challenges of tutoring multilingual writers (Nan), writing centers and assessment (Gofine; Konicki), and more. Methodologies employed by tutor researchers also unsurprisingly mirror the variety of methodologies employed by their mentors: survey research (Nicklay), case study (Brendel), and linguistic analysis (Wilder) are three examples.

Tutor research is published, without apology or qualification, in journals relevant to writing center work such as *The Writing Center Journal*, whose 2012 special issue featured only tutor research, with seven superior examples of undergraduate-authored articles. And lest we assume that peer tutors see their work through to publication only when afforded an opportunity to publish in “special” issues or undergraduate-only journals like *Young Scholars*, a quick dip into *The Writing Center Journal* issue 27.1 says otherwise: Beginning on page 7, we find one of two IWCA Outstanding Articles for 2008, “Taking on Turnitin: Tutors Advocating Change,” authored collaboratively by undergraduate and graduate student tutors. (More on this later.)

Writing center scholars have begun to pay attention to how tutor research happens, as well. Several recent key publications and keynote addresses illustrates how leaders in the discipline are investigating undergraduate research in composition and rhetoric, in particular in writing centers. Grobman and Kinkead’s work has led the way, in particular the edited collection *Undergraduate Research in English Studies* (2010) and Rose and Grobman’s 2010 *Writing Lab Newsletter* article “Scholarship Reconsidered: Tutor-Scholars as Undergraduate Researchers.” Two keynote addresses at recent conferences highlighted tutor research (Lauren Fitzgerald’s at the 2012 IWCA Conference and Melissa Ianetta’s at the SWCA Conference in 2013), and an edited version of Fitzgerald’s keynote was published later in *The Writing Center Journal*. And the same team recently published *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research*, whose Section III instructs peer tutors about pedagogical, theoretical, and historical writing center research (Fitzgerald and Ianetta). In this context, in

which we are seeing a surge of superior peer tutor research and the additional layer of scholarship about tutor research and the mentoring of tutor researchers, it makes sense to begin investigating the unique feature of peer tutoring that makes undergraduate research an inherent component and a logical extension of the peer tutor’s work. To that end, I encourage directors to ask undergraduate tutors to think about their work through an investigative lens, to encourage growth along what DelliCarpini and Crimmins describe as a continuum from *praxis* (teaching and tutoring practice) to thinking about how *praxis* informs *gnosis* (knowledge/theory) and vice versa.

Peer Tutors Are Disciplinary Professionals

A challenge faced by many faculty mentors of undergraduate researchers across the disciplines is that the faculty mentor is assumed to be the research and disciplinary expert, and the undergraduate researcher is the novice. The transmission of research knowledge is generally one-way: Faculty teach undergraduates how to conduct a research study. Peer writing tutors, unlike most other undergraduate researchers, are in a good position to develop their *own* researchable questions and, with mentoring or through research partnerships with faculty/directors, to design projects to answer those questions. In a very real sense, peer writing tutors are the disciplinary experts alongside their faculty/directors, so it makes sense that writing center directors look to undergraduate peer tutors for expertise about peer tutoring and encourage them to initiate or participate in writing center research.

Not all writing center scholars agree that undergraduate peer writing tutors are disciplinary “professionals”—or that they should be considered “professionals.” Kenneth Bruffee observed that “[s]ome institutions even regard ‘peer tutors’ as ‘professionalized’ ” and, in those institutions, “the tutors do not regard themselves, and their tutees do not regard them, as sharing fully in the vicissitudes, burdens, and constraints of normal student life” (97). Bruffee concludes that these tutors’ peer status is “thoroughly compromised” (97). By contrast, those institutions that consider undergraduate peer writing tutors primarily as collaborative learners encourage tutors to “see the institution from the same place their tutees see it, from the bottom. That is, collaborative peer tutors work within the institutional constraints that their tutees experience” (Bruffee 97). Bruffee sets up an either/or dichotomy: Either peer tutors must be complicit in wielding institutional authority and power, which precludes collaboration with student writers, or

they must exist outside of the institutional power structure and gaze upward from the bottom, alongside the students they tutor. Attempts to professionalize peer tutors, Bruffee implies, place them squarely in the former camp.

I offer an alternative to Bruffee's either/or dichotomy: Undergraduate peer writing tutors are neither looking up at the academic ivory towers from the bottom of the academic trenches, nor are they cogs in the wheels of the academic institutional machinery. Their professional position emerges from their unique institutional position: They are students and tutors, at once aligned with peers and set apart from them.

The Peer Perspective as Research Tool

Tutors exist in a liminal space, one that places them squarely among peers and professionals simultaneously, giving them the tools necessary to carry out the unique work of peer tutoring in writing, to act as both peer and tutor and to move between those two roles or frames of mind. It is their position in this liminal space that produces the peer relationships that can serve them in their investigations of peer tutoring and writing centers generally. Undergraduate peer tutors develop trust and camaraderie with student writers and with their faculty/directors and in some ways serve as cultural informants for both. In the same way peer writing tutors help student writers "rehearse being insiders" (Hawkins 67), peer tutors can also serve as insiders to student culture for their faculty/directors. In the context of an undergraduate research partnership, such insider status is worth gold for a faculty researcher interested investigating student learning. The liminal social-academic space between student and faculty, between learner and educator, helps undergraduate peer tutors identify researchable problems that their faculty/directors might not consider. The examples that follow illustrate how undergraduate peer tutors can bring a unique perspective to a research partnership with a faculty mentor.

Example 1: Peer Perspective Leads to Plagiarism Research at Indiana University of Pennsylvania

One has to look no further than a 2007 *Writing Center Journal* article by Renee Brown, Brian Fallon, Jessica Lott, Elizabeth Matthews, and Elizabeth Mintie entitled "Taking on Turnitin: Tutors Advocate Change" to see the role of peer tutor expertise in identifying and investigating a researchable problem. Four undergraduate peer tutors and a PhD student at

Indiana University of Pennsylvania, under the guidance of their director Ben Rafoth, authored this IWCA award-winning article. The groundbreaking article eventually saw publication and became a common text used by writing center professionals across the country because a group of undergraduate peer tutors-turned-researchers identified meaningful researchable problems that emerged from their peer interactions with IUP undergraduate students. Brown et al. explain: "As tutors, we see a lot that other people at our institutions either take for granted or barely recognize, but we do have the ability and opportunity to speak up on those often glanced over issues and to reach out to fellow students and our faculty" (26-27). Brown et al. make it clear that they exist in the liminal space I described earlier, and such an existence led directly to their research.

In this case, IUP students shared their concerns with peer writing tutors about how Turnitin was being used by their teachers to flag supposedly "plagiarized" text. With support from their director, Ben Rafoth, the tutors began to research Turnitin in order to answer two questions: "What did our writing center staff need to know about Turnitin? And, How could tutors help students who must deal with Turnitin and the professors who require it?" (Brown et al. 8). As soon as they began to answer those "tutor-focused" questions, prompted by "peer-focused" interactions with students, they found themselves swimming around in the liminal space in which peer writing tutors work every day. They consulted writing center and composition scholarship that helped them to develop nuanced understandings of plagiarism, which complicated what they understood plagiarism to be—academic dishonesty—from their perspectives as students (9). From some of their research emerged culturally-sensitive notions of plagiarism not shared by many faculty. And they began to understand "the writing center's tempestuous past and present relationship to plagiarism" (10)—the tendency for writing centers to guard against accusations that tutors offer too much help on student writing. Finally, they concluded that "there was, or at least should be, an arena for tutors to discuss campus-wide issues that affect tutoring" (12), and they had "found it necessary to step outside the traditional roles of writing center tutors in order to make claims about how Turnitin was influencing teaching on" at IUP (11-12).

IUP students might never have voiced their concerns about Turnitin had it not been for their comfort level with the peer tutors whom they trusted *because* they were peers. In turn, Brown et al. (2007) would likely have never published "Taking on Turnitin," nor shared their findings with other writing

center professionals, nor shaped the attitudes and understanding about Turnitin at campuses across the country, had Director Rafoth never encouraged the tutors, along with graduate student tutor Brian Fallon, to pursue this line of research. In other words, Rafoth's tutors worked within a writing center whose culture supported an ethos of inquiry that encouraged peer tutors to investigate their praxis and theorize their work.

Example 2: Peer Tutor-International Student Friendships at the University of South Dakota

A second illustration from my own experience—in fact, my first experience—with undergraduate research will, I hope, drive my point home. In my second year as Writing Center Director at the University of South Dakota, I was asked by one of my undergraduate tutors to direct her writing center-focused Honors thesis. Amber wanted to study how the relationships between ESL students and consultants affected teaching and learning in the Center. Over a six-month period, I guided her through methodological decisions, human subjects training, interviewing and observing students and consultants, presentation of her findings at the 2005 IWCA-NCPTW Conference, and finally drafting, revising, and defending her thesis.

Amber's thesis investigated the interpersonal relationship building that occurs when non-native speakers of English work repeatedly with the same tutor over the course of several semesters. She employed qualitative research methods—interviews and observations of ESL conversation sessions—and arrived at a new understanding about how international students utilize our center: They sought out conversation tutoring both to improve their listening and speaking skills and to build friendships with our undergraduate writing consultants. Before Amber conducted her research, we understood relationship building as “value added” for these tutoring sessions; however, after her investigation we understood that a large part of the appeal of the center to international students was the opportunity to “make friends,” a finding we were unsure at first how to apply to the teaching and learning in our center but that we were eventually able to utilize in a restructuring of our ESL tutoring, with a renewed focus on group conversations (1-2 tutors and 2-3 ESL students) that emphasized social interaction, current events, and other engaging topics for both tutors and students. It did not hurt that these “conversation sessions” almost always paved the way for writing sessions, a development I used to market the writing

center to faculty and students involved in our international programming.

In the end, Amber not only taught me something about interpersonal relationships between ESL students and their English-speaking consultants, but she also taught me about the potential of undergraduate research to help me better understand how teaching and learning were taking place in my writing center in ways that escaped my notice because, simply put, she was a peer, an “insider-outsider,” who noticed things that I did not.

Amber's Honors thesis began with a simple question about the development of *friendships* between ESL students and their English-speaking consultants. My observant Honors student had noted that many ESL students continued their associations with peer tutors outside the writing center, even going so far as to open their homes to the peer tutors when they traveled to those students' home countries. While in the writing center, the peer tutor clearly enacted the *tutor* role, but outside the writing center, the *peer* role led to further interaction and the development of friendships. My observations, of course, were limited to what I observed *in* the center, and what I observed as a director. As a director, I had never developed *friendships* with the students who utilized the writing center and failed to see this development between our international students and some of the peer tutors. In fact, had I known about how some tutors' relationships with international students had moved beyond the walls of the writing center, I might have viewed the development with a director's blinders on: I might have worried whether the international students' expectation that the tutors interact with them outside the writing center was an intrusion on tutor privacy, or blurred some boundary between professional work and private life. I might never have become curious about the nature of or the development of these friendships like Amber did simply because I was not viewing the development through the eyes of the *peer tutor*. In short, I learned the same lesson from Amber that is implicit in the Brown et al. article about Turnitin: Peer tutors can bring to research partnerships an expertise that emerges from their institutional position as *peers*.

Conclusion: Peer Tutors and Professional Research

Although my argument will not satisfy everyone, I believe writing center directors should redefine what it means to be a peer writing tutor so that peer writing tutors regularly involve themselves in research and scholarly activity about their own and their colleagues'

peer tutoring practices, regardless of whether that research is pedagogical, theoretical, or historical. As Fitzgerald argues, “Peer writing tutoring is *the* site of Practitioner Inquiry, offering exigencies for research” (22). The undergraduate peer writing tutor, who is positioned uniquely in the academy compared to other disciplines’ undergraduate researchers, can identify research opportunities in writing centers, opportunities that professionals (the faculty and other administrative staff) often miss. Konicki, in the 2011 issue of *Young Scholars in Writing*, puts it this way: “Peer tutors . . . need to realize our scholarly position in relation to writing programs and understand that our insider-outsider status gives us unique knowledge that can shape writing programs in ways that benefit our peers and future students” (85). I agree; tutor researchers, with mentoring from either their directors or other experienced tutor researchers, can cultivate this “insider-outsider status” in ways that benefit tutoring through research. When writing centers were mostly called “writing labs” and the NCPTW was in its infancy, notes of caution like those from Bruffee were based on a notion of peer tutoring of writing that the discipline has in some ways outgrown. In the context of an academic culture that seeks to bring undergraduate research into *all* undergraduates’ educational experiences, writing centers are rich with potential for undergraduate/faculty research partnerships. And when their directors allow it, they can teach us important things like Brown et al. and Amber have. The responsibility falls to us as writing center directors, though, to create environments in which undergraduate tutor research is encouraged and rewarded, and to ensure that the tutoring of writing in the researchers’ home writing centers benefits from tutors’ research. Our discipline’s professional organizations, like IWCA, NCPTW, and CCCC, have led the way at the national level, and individual writing centers and directors would do well to follow that lead at the local.

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