

OUR STUDENTS CAN DO THAT: PEER WRITING TUTORS AT THE TWO YEAR COLLEGE

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Abstract

Because of the author's experience hearing from other writing center professionals at community colleges that community college students are not capable of serving as peer tutors, as well as survey data demonstrating that community colleges do not hire peer tutors at the same rate as other institutions of higher learning, the author conducted exit interviews of peer tutors at Salt Lake Community College in order to determine what peer tutors learn from their work experiences in a community college writing center. The purpose of the study was to establish what peer tutors learn, in order to correlate not simply what they take away from their experience, but also to substantiate that peer tutors can indeed help the writers they work with to learn. Since the results of this analysis were broad and represented a wide variety of concepts that are learned by peer tutors, the author designed a more specific survey to explore what they learned about writing and being a writer. The resulting data lead the author to conclude that peer tutors learn much from their work experience, allaying concerns that community college students are not capable of serving as peer tutors.

Author's note: This essay is based upon two keynote addresses: one at the South Central Writing Centers Association Conference in Corpus Christi in 2013, and the other at the Transitioning to College Writing Conference hosted by the University of Mississippi in 2015. I have also presented the results of interviews at various conferences including CCCC, IWCA, and NCPTW.

Back in the 90s when I was pretty new to my writing center directing career, I was presenting at our local Two-Year College Association Conference on how we at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) had developed a peer tutoring program. It was a standard *how-to-writing-center* presentation and I discussed all the pertinent issues: dealing with staffing turnover; recruiting tutors from varied backgrounds—including students who struggled with writing in the past, preparing peer tutors to work with the wide variety of writers we see, etc. You can imagine, then, during the question and answer period, that I was rather taken aback when my whole presentation and premise for hiring peer tutors was dismissed by a writing center colleague from another community college.

"Our students could never do that," she said. In my mind's eye, I have the person storming out of my session, but in reality I think she just sat down while I hemmed and hawed for a response.

This colleague's community college was no different from most other community colleges I've seen: more racially and ethnically diverse than other types of higher ed institutions, with students from a wide range of ages and socio-economic backgrounds, more veterans, more returning students, and more refugees (AACC 2). In other words, that community college, like most others, demographically reflected the community that it served. As George Vaughan from the Academy for Community College Leadership and Advancement, Innovation, and Modeling stated, "If one wants to understand who attends a community college... stand on a busy street corner, and watch people go by" (19).

While I have no idea what my reply to this particular colleague was—I don't think I swore excessively—the person's indignation at my hiring peer tutors is burned into my memory and has been a prime motivator for me to study the efficacy of peer tutors at community colleges, what impact they have on the institution as a whole, and, most importantly, what impact their work has on their education and lives.

This demonstration of negativity towards peer tutoring at community colleges is not unique, given that I've encountered it both more and less blatantly in discussions with colleagues over the years. The bias is borne out by the data from the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) 2001-2008, which indicates that two-year colleges have peer tutors work in their centers at a lower rate than other higher educational institution types with 126 responses out of 260 (47%) for two-year colleges, versus 260 to 306 (85%) at four year institutions ("Raw Survey Data from Previous Years"). The current WCRP data from 2014-2015 indicates a moderate growth in the number of peer tutors at two-year colleges; the percentage is now at 58% (n=38), but we still lag behind four-year institutions which are now at 95% (n=64). The lower number of responses from the current WCRP must be taken into consideration when evaluating whether or not there is an upward trend in peer tutoring at two-year colleges.

Since I've not yet surveyed two-year college writing center administrators, I can only make

informed guesses about the reasoning behind why two-year colleges don't avail themselves of peer tutors: peer tutors are ill-prepared and cannot talk about writing; having them do so would be having the ignorant teaching the ignorant. In other words, the "our students could never do that" attitude flies directly in the face of the early peer tutoring theory of Kenneth Bruffee, who championed peer response as an effective teaching model, and addressed the issue of the "blind leading the blind" by stating that

One answer to this question is that while neither peer tutors nor their tutees may alone be masters of the normal discourse of a given knowledge community, by working together—pooling their resources—they are very likely to be able to master it if their conversation is structured indirectly by the task of problem that a member of that community (the teacher) provides. (9-10)

I am not going to address the bigotry behind such negative beliefs, as that seems counterproductive, and I would rather focus on positive outcomes. I also won't be focusing on whether or not peer tutors can give effective feedback. That topic is definitely worthy of further study but I am instead going to explore the impact that writing center work has on peer tutors; how they learn about writing; how they, in turn, can pass that knowledge along to the students they work with; and what they learn from their fellow students. I will explore how peer tutors demonstrate that they can do this work, and that it does have an important impact on their abilities as writers and their lives as human beings. Being a peer tutor is a reciprocal educational experience in and of itself.

There are a growing number of studies that explore what peer tutors learn about writing—a specific claim that Bruffee made when advocating peer tutoring in writing ("Conversation of Mankind"). One study that explores Bruffee's assertion is the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP). That project was developed by Brad Hughes, Paula Gillespie, and Harvey Kail in order to better understand the effects that peer tutor work in a writing center environment has on students. Hughes, Gillespie, and Kail have found significant academic and career trajectory outcomes for peer tutors who have worked in their institutions, as they report in their 2010 article from *Writing Center Journal*, "What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project." The project asks alumni peer tutors to respond to a written survey. The PWTARP project focuses on impact on learning (particularly in learning about writing), as well as career and education path.

For several years now, I have been tracking the careers of peer tutors (formally, Peer Writing Advisors) who worked at the Salt Lake Community College Student Writing Center—loosely based upon the guidelines put forth by the PWTARP. My spin on the project was to record exit interviews to probe the depths of the impact the writing center had on their education and their lives. (See the Appendix for the complete set of interview questions.) I have recorded fifteen exit interviews since 2007 and have been the sole interviewer, transcriber, and researcher. All tutors who have stopped working at the Student Writing Center are asked to be interviewed, but seven were unavailable for it. When I initially started conducting the interviews, Salt Lake Community College did not have an institutional review board (IRB). SLCC has since instituted an IRB, and I have obtained IRB approval for further research. Overall, I believe the recordings make a better connection with the interview subjects than written responses and are certainly more evocative than text. I've used them, in fact, to show administrators the importance of peer tutoring to our institution.

My exit interviews echo the findings of foundational studies that "peer tutors help themselves increase their own understanding of the subject matter they tutor students in/on, which boosts confidence and can carry over to their desire to learn other subjects" (Ehly et al. 21). While I have no evidence that these tutors "desire to learn other subjects," it is clear that they have expanded their ideas about people and the world at large.

Likewise, the PWTARP supports these conclusions, based upon formalized surveys of what alumni peer tutors say they have learned in their work in writing centers. PWTARP identifies the following topics that the respondents state they developed:

a new relationship with writing; analytical power; a listening presence; skills, values, and abilities vital in their professions; skills, values, and abilities vital in families and in relationships; earned confidence in themselves; and a deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning. (14)

The exit interviews I conducted represent all of these developments, except for the application in their profession, since they have not started their profession at the time of their exit interview. Since I teach writing, I was initially more interested in what peer tutors learned about *writing* and *rhetoric* rather than other outcomes. Over the course of conducting the interviews, however, my perspective changed.

In accordance with the IRB guidelines in place at Salt Lake Community College, I have changed the

names of the five peer tutors to capital letters (*T*, *C*, *K*, *N*, and *F*) in order to protect their privacy. *CG* indicates me.

One of my first interviews from 2007 was with *T*, a female tutor in her early twenties who worked in the Student Writing Center for approximately two years where she conducted 462 sessions with approximately 354 different students:

CG: What are the most significant abilities, values, or skills you developed as a Peer Writing Advisor?

T: Empathy, patience, and the ability to break down my own language for others, and the ability to pick apart my own writing because of what other students have written—seeing patterns that I use in their writing, and being able to look at it subjectively—objectively? [Eyeball upwards as if questioning which word to use.]

CG: So do you think, in some sense, that it has helped you improve as a writer working with other folks even though they may be more struggling writers let's say?

T: Yes, because I started at that base. That's one of the things I think I was—one of the strongest things I was hired for is because I wasn't a natural at this, I had to work at it. I know where they're at. I know how that feels.

CG: You can connect. You can connect.

T: Yup.

In retrospect, I see that *T*'s statement is thorough, but it wasn't the answer I wanted to hear. I then re-asked the question, as if learning empathy wasn't an important thing to learn or related to writing.

CG: Um. What do you think you learned most—aside from empathy—which is a good thing to learn! [laughs]—is there anything specific you learned in responding to people and their writing or teaching or something like that?

T: Different learning styles. You need to be able to cater to each one; if you go on a different track either they're not going to learn or they are going to use you as a crutch as they've used other people. Using their learning style to their ability gives them a chance to take responsibility of their own academic progress.

Nevertheless, despite what I thought at the time I interviewed *T*, she is indeed talking about writing and what she learned about writing. As she said, she learned how to read her own writing through the lens of those writers she worked with, and respond accordingly. Because, as she claims, she wasn't a

“natural” at writing, she had to pay better attention to her own work and to the work of others. *T* is talking about a complex set of activities and language use: she learned to apply analytical principles to her writing or, in her words, to “break down my own language” and “pick apart my own writing” through “seeing patterns that I use” in the writing of others.

When I interviewed *T*, my view of tutors' work and what they learned was parochial at best, and completely focused on a very narrow view of what writing is and how people learned to write. Peer tutoring does, indeed, give something more to the tutor than just learning about writing. Peer tutors *do* learn empathy. Peer tutors learn about the mechanics of learning and how to accommodate varied learning styles. Mostly, of course, they learn about working with other people—people they may have never even considered working with before. As Brian Fallon stated in his 2011 National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing keynote address, “Peer tutors... teach all of us how to meet our students where they are, how to celebrate in that space, and how to be open to learning from moments that present great challenges” (362). Furthermore, in his 2010 dissertation *The Perceived, Conceived, and Lived Experiences of 21st Century Peer Writing Tutors*, Fallon challenges the field to

go back to those original conceptions of peer tutoring, to rethink Bruffee, Harris, Trimbur, Hawkins, and Kail, and to think about their early work in terms of the lived experiences of present-day tutors. Writing center scholars have done their work when it comes to the perceived and conceived experiences of tutors, but it is time to fold a new voice into the debate by including peer tutors more substantially in our professional communities of practice. By seeing our field through the eyes of peer tutors, we stand a better chance of understanding the future contributions of peer tutoring to teaching and learning. (235-236)

For Fallon, the perceived and conceived experiences of peer tutors are what we directors (or theorists) place upon them, rather than the tutors' *lived experiences* that we can only find out through talking with them, and not filtering that conversation through our own perceptions and conceptions (*Perceived* 205-217). My narrow conception of peer tutoring as “only about writing” or “learning to write” is far too reductive; as Fallon describes, I found that I needed to be more open to other types of learning taking place—learning based on tutors' lived experiences. Learning about

other concepts is represented in many of my interviews, such as with *C* and *K*.

C, a male in his mid-twenties, worked in the Student Writing Center for approximately three years where he conducted 1,403 tutoring sessions with 955 students. He confirms that working with writers helps one put their own writing and learning in perspective:

C: I think one of the most valuable things was to see writing as a process. I think it was particularly when I started working with students—working with them on their papers and trying to help them see how they could improve their papers, I started to realize that I had to give myself the patience with my own writing, and give myself time to do it and time to write multiple drafts, and see it as a process instead of a product model.

K, a male in his early twenties, worked in the Student Writing Center for approximately eighteen months where he conducted 260 sessions with 195 different writers:

K: Well, I think by helping other people write and learn to be better writers, in the process I definitely gained writing skills, and so reaped the benefits of that. You know everything from planning and outlining, I've realized that by helping other people plan and outline their papers how crucial it is in writing a paper...

CG: Anything else?

K: Well, research, I've learned to evaluate the credibility of sources. So that's really important.

Other interviewees highlight the various skills they picked up, much like *T*, who identified empathy as a key lesson from her time as a tutor. *N*, a mid-twenties male, worked in the Student Writing Center for approximately two and a half years where he conducted 724 sessions with 507 writers:

N: I think people skills, obviously. You know when I would first would meet with people I would be really nervous—I would shake or sometimes I'd stutter. I remember one of the first things [a colleague] said 'I don't know if I can do this.'" And I was thinking the same thing! But we both decided to—uh—just—we trusted you and we trusted your confidence in us.

Like *T*, *N* was a student who had struggled during his high school education because of learning disabilities, and he admitted that he lacked confidence in his own abilities as a student. His ability to overcome his own apprehension is certainly something that one can note as successful. In his tutoring evaluations, students regularly commented on how *N* regarded them with

respect and evinced concern for their learning and performance as a student. *N*, like *T* before him, was able to take his apprehensions and learn to not just overcome them, but to use them as a way to connect with students.

Finally, *F*, a male in his early twenties, worked in the Student Writing Center for one year and conducted 219 tutoring sessions with 173 different writers:

F: I think just being able to have the opportunity to talk with people from so many different cultures and so many different languages, has... helped me become globalized. You know what I mean? It just helps me see everybody more as like one big community. And just helping to see people, as people in need or somebody's individual strengths rather than any sort of racial barriers. It has really helped to break any notions of that down for me, and I really value you that a lot.

F identifies a development of increased understanding about people from different backgrounds, as well as hinting at the idea that he learned tolerance through working as a writing tutor. *F* admitted to me at one point that his upbringing was what he called "sheltered," and that he was home-schooled. I do not know the extent of that sheltering, but *F* seems to believe that his exposure to others while tutoring has brought him increased, sustained contact with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds from his own.

Even though the interviews I have conducted show that that peer tutoring has a far wider impact on tutors than just what they learn about writing, I was still compelled to determine if the basic claims made about peer tutoring (that it helps to improve the tutor's writing) could be measured, and how such learning about writing is demonstrated.

Exit interviews were slowing the pace of the study because of low tutor turnover rate, so I decided to speed things up by conducting a focused survey of the current peer tutoring staff at the Salt Lake Community College Student Writing Center (see Appendix) with a total of seventeen responses.

In the survey, I ask "What have you learned about writing from working with the writing of others?" One respondent explains that seeing the mistakes that other writers made gave her a stronger sense of basic writing principles:

"I have learned how important each part of the writing process is and how easily any part can be missed if the writing project is rushed. The importance of a clear thesis statement, good topic sentences, logical organization of evidence, and effective conclusion has been

reinforced for me. Mostly I have learned 2 things: 1) focused and sufficient research is essential for creating an interesting and convincing paper, and 2) research and writing must take place within the context of questions and critical thinking.”

Another tutor learned about style:

“My knowledge of mechanics has improved as has my awareness of options in writing style. I also feel it has improved my ability to self-edit my work.”

And another learned about grammar:

“Mostly techniques but it has also inspired me to learn more about grammar because even though I know how to write ‘well’ because I know when to write or not write certain things somewhere along the way it became more automatic and less cause and effect. So I would have sessions where students would ask me why we do certain things grammatically and I’d have to look it up because I forgot to ask why and so now I’ve become more curious about the whys in writing.”

As with *T* in the exit interviews, the context of writers working on writing—even struggling writers—helped these three respondents to see how writing can be crafted and improved. Tutors apply their current knowledge and reinforce it when they work with peers to find answers for themselves and make choices as writers. They seek out new knowledge from reliable sources when they don’t know the answers. Working as tutors also helped them to apply and explore notions of writing that they would otherwise only see within the context of their own work. Thus, a peer tutor demonstrates learning when she helps a writer to apply different styles or different grammatical structures, as well as when she works with a writer to make decisions about problems they encounter in their writing (Devet 125-126).

Furthermore, learning respect for writers is demonstrated in how one respondent summed up tutoring writers:

“I find that I am constantly learning about the art of writing. Students will bring work into the writing center that I am intrigued by. They are using their writing in way that I had never thought of or never thought was worth trying. By helping others, I am becoming more experimental and willing to try things out.”

By experiencing another writer’s choices, this tutor developed a better sense of the choices she or he can make as a writer. The tutor shows an awareness that a student, no matter their perceived abilities, makes

choices as a writer and deserves respect as such. This particular respondent has learned what Wardle and Hughes call a *great advantage*:

Tutors view their conferences not in terms of the idiosyncratic ‘deficits’ of individual writers (or particular demographics of writers) but in terms of processes of learning that challenge *many* individuals at *many* different stages of their academic careers. (178)

Tiffany Rousculp, my colleague at SLCC, emphasizes the need to respect writers and what they bring to a writing center:

[Community Writing Center (CWC)] staff tried to remain fully aware of the complexities that people brought with them into relationship with the CWC—ever unfolding webs of resources, needs, and desires. The people whom... the community college... wanted to “empower” were not deficient beings requiring our educational benevolence; as such, it was not the Community Writing Center’s role to lead people to “change;” rather, we need to respect them for who, what, and where they were at a particular moment. This realization steadily altered the way the CWC would relate to the community—from seeing ourselves as a source of salvific change toward what Ellen Cushman calls “deroutinization.” (54)

As Rousculp notes, Cushman references sociologist Anthony Giddens’ definition of “routinization” as social constructs and structures that shape our behaviors and interactions. “Deroutinization” gives us pause allows us to move social change by disrupting the routine (Cushman 12-13). As Rousculp notes, tutors who worked in the CWC gained new perspectives on the writers they worked with. I am convinced that the same “deroutinization” of cultural perceptions of “disadvantaged” or “underprepared” students happens for all writing tutors who have learned to respect the people they work with.

Finally, one respondent put it this way:

“The writing process is messy. What works for one person doesn’t always work for others. Also, it can be challenging for writers to recognize their own mistakes. Sometimes writers need others to explicitly point out what is not working or needs to be changed. Not to mention, writing is very personal and it can be hard to ask others for help, but it can also be liberating.”

These anonymous written responses echo the findings of my recorded exit interviews when I asked

participants, “What are the most significant abilities, values, or skills that you developed in your work as a peer writing advisor?” Rather than it just being about writing and rhetoric, the respondents read that question broadly. They understand that there are significant abilities, values, and skills not just about *writing* but about the human being who is doing the writing. They don’t see their fellow students as helpless in their own education, or as victims of society, or, even worse, as culprits in their own failure. Peer tutors learn to respect the people they are working with as writers, learners, and human beings.

Nevertheless, they do learn that writing is a social act, and that it is important for writers to share their work with others. They learn about the writing process, as old-fashioned a term as that may be these days. They learn about revision and ways to make that stage of their process more effective. They learn about genre, style, usage, and grammar. They also learn to think about their own writing in novel and productive ways.

Working as a peer tutor in a community college gives the student a chance to take on this difficult yet invigorating work. They learn from the students they are working with—in the best traditions of peer tutoring. Having peer tutors work in a community college writing center is well worth any risk that people presume. They can apply the considerable amount that they already know and they can continue to learn while doing it. Thus, they become stronger writers and strong responders to writing. Becoming better responders ultimately improves their overall ability to communicate. There is little risk and a lot of reward for all participants in peer tutoring, but it is particularly rewarding for peer tutors.

The PWTARP results emphasize the impact that working in a writing center as a peer tutor can have:

When undergraduate writing tutors and fellows participate in challenging and sustained staff education, and when they interact closely with other student writers and with other peer tutors through our writing centers and writing fellows programs, they develop in profound ways both intellectually and academically. This developmental experience, play out in their tutor education and in their work as peer tutors and fellows, helps to shape and sometimes transform them personally, educationally, and professionally. (Hughes et al. 13)

In emphasizing that we should pay attention to the lived experiences of peer tutors, Fallon extends the work of PWTARP: “The journeys that peer tutors must take to become effective doers are fascinating because

they entail more than what writing center scholarship may imagine” (*Perceived* 187). Further, “What can be learned from PWTARP... is that peer tutoring fostered a kind of liberal education that penetrated the relationships these individuals had with everyone from co-workers to family members” (Fallon, *Perceived* 222).

When we at two-year schools take on pessimistic attitudes that resemble “our students could never do that” or that they won’t be in the center long enough for it to matter, we are accepting the trite and misinformed perception of community college students as failures instead of real human beings with real potential. We are not offering them the respect they deserve in taking on the challenge of education. We are also, I fear, not respecting ourselves and the work that we do. We are falling into the trap of believing that students who attend community colleges are either victims of themselves or society, cannot take action that will effect change in their lives and their communities, and cannot decide for themselves whether or not such changes are needed. Our students *can* do this work. Our students *do* perform this work. Our students take more from it than we realize.

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Appendix

SLCC STUDENT WRITING CENTER EXIT INTERVIEW*

- 1) For archival purposes, please state your name, which locations you worked at, and how long you have been working for the Student Writing Center.
- 2) What additional education have you pursued or will you pursue after leaving SLCC?
- 3) What are your ultimate career goals?
- 4) What are the most significant abilities, values, or skills that you developed in your work as a peer writing advisor?
- 5) Describe your most positive experience from your work in the Writing Center.
- 6) How has your writing center training and experience shaped your development as a college student?
- 7) Anything you'd like to add?

*Based on The Peer Tutor Alumni Project Survey

(<http://www.marquette.edu/writingcenter/PeerTutorAlumniPage.htm>)

“Writing and the Writing Consultant Survey”

- 1) To what extent do you think your own writing has been influenced by your experience as a writing consultant?
- 2) In reference to your answer to the first question, please explain how your writing has been influenced by working as a writing consultant.
- 3) What have you learned about writing from working with the writing of others?
- 4) How important do you think getting feedback on your writing is?
- 5) When you write something, how often do you get feedback from others?
- 6) How long have you worked as a writing consultant?