

Tutors' Column: "Modeling Peerness: Undergraduate Peer Tutors Leading Education for New Tutors"

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In spring 2017, my writing center director and I implemented peer-led discussion in a one-credit tutor-education course. I am an undergraduate peer tutor with three years of experience in the Bloomsburg University Writing Center. In each weekly meeting of the course, I was responsible for about thirty minutes of peer-led discussions focused on instructor-assigned readings on peer tutoring concepts. Initially, my director, Ted Roggenbuck, involved

me in the course for practical reasons: it saved him time otherwise spent preparing lessons and gave me a chance to explore my career interest in writing pedagogy. However, we found my peer-led discussions had pedagogical value we didn't fully anticipate. My post-course interviews with new tutors from the class revealed that integrating peer-led discussion into tutor education provided these new tutors an experience of the peerness that characterizes many writing centers, deepening new tutors' engagement and providing them a potential model of peer-to-peer interactions.

Much as it does in the writing center, peer involvement in the tutor education classroom inspired increased discussion and engagement. Because I am a peer, our new tutors opened up to me—informally around the writing center, before class, and even in class—in ways they may not have with a faculty member, allowing me to address their concerns about tutoring. One new consultant told me, "We [were] allowed to ask ... questions that ... we'd probably be discouraged [to ask a professor] because it'd probably be embarrassing or sound dumb. But because you've already been through it in our position, it[s] easier, or more comfortable." I also found that the new tutors' comfort enabled them to challenge my interpretations of the course readings, leading to deeply engaging discussions. My director agreed, saying that although he and I used similar techniques in the classroom—new tutors were more engaged in the course this semester than in the past. This class

engagement translated to greater engagement in the writing center more broadly; he reported that new tutors in this class took on greater responsibility in the writing center than others he'd worked with in the past.

Additionally, the model of peer co-learning in our course helped some of our new tutors understand how and why peer tutoring works. One new tutor, for example, developed confidence in the idea that she did not need to be an expert to be an effective peer tutor after discovering that I did not have all the answers to questions raised by tutors in her class. She learned that these difficult questions could be fruitfully explored through collaborative discussion: "You ... understood what was going on," she told me, but "if you didn't, ... we just share[d] ideas." Similarly, several tutors stated that experiencing peer-to-peer interactions with me gave them insight into the felt experiences of tutees, insight that influenced their tutoring praxis. For example, multiple tutors commented that they hoped to create the "comfortable, homey" atmosphere they'd enjoyed in the class in their own sessions.

However, the interviews also revealed that I did not always do enough to draw connections between my approach to the class and our discussions of peerness. When asked in post-course interviews if I'd modeled peerness in the classroom, some students were initially puzzled, not having conceived of their experience in that context. One, thinking I wanted to emulate faculty, initially reassured me that she wouldn't have realized I was a student unless I'd told her. Only after reflection did she conclude, "The class definitely was different from all my other courses. ... [In those classes,] it's just like the professor teaches, ... you do your homework, you take the exams, boom, boom, boom ... but the class was more active. We discussed a lot of things." Her realization that she could learn about peerness in tutoring from our interactions in the course was unprompted; her own reflection in the span of a few minutes in the interview helped her reconceptualize her experience. But her shift in perspective was impactful. Later, when she described my approach to the class, she compared it to sessions: "As a tutor, you ... teach the tutee the correct way of doing it, and then they pick out the mistakes themselves, and I feel like that's pretty much exactly what our class was. We learned ... how to do something, and then ... we acted those things out in the writing center...The class was more active. It was more like a peer editing class. We just share ideas." In future classes, new tutors might be better able to make connections if both the instructor and experienced peer tutor explicitly clarify the purpose

of involving an experienced peer tutor in the course and provide structured opportunities for reflection on the parallels between the peer interactions they detect in the course and their tutoring.

Although class interactions differ from tutoring sessions and require different techniques, the process of navigating peerness is similar, meaning new tutors can learn from observing an experienced tutor lead discussion. Peerness in a classroom setting is often unfamiliar to students: As John Trimbur argues, typical academic interactions are bounded by an “academic hierarchy” in which learning is understood as unidirectional, with knowledge-endowed faculty above students, and collaborative learning is devalued (22). Because students are influenced by the assumptions of this hierarchy, it is difficult for them to see tutors as peers, and more often think of them as “little teachers” because tutors are institutionally endorsed, often have greater knowledge of writing than students, and sometimes perform pedagogical tasks (27). Similarly, in my role in the course, I had been endorsed by the instructor, so I brought some authority to the class, and my experience working in the writing center and conducting writing center research made me more knowledgeable about writing center best practices and the literature we read than the new tutors in the class. As a result, it was difficult for new tutors to see me as a peer, especially at first. One student, using language notably similar to Trimbur’s, commented that she initially saw me more as a “teacher[’s] helper” than a fellow peer tutor. Because of these parallels between my role in the course and peer tutoring, experiencing the dynamic of the class provided tutors a fruitful opportunity for reflection on how they can act as peers in sessions, whether they felt I navigated my role successfully or not. In the interviews, some of our tutors already showed signs of making these connections: One new tutor, comparing this class to others, said, “We see professors every day, we have that type of lecture every day, but ... someone that is in the same age bracket as us can be like a mentor.” In other words, at least some of our tutors have already reflected on peerness in the course, and all have experienced and responded to it in the classroom; the challenge in future iterations of the course is to make sure future students connect these experiences of peerness in their tutor education class to their tutoring in the writing center.

I do not mean to say I always provided a good example of peerness. Like many tutors, I sometimes got stuck in the academic hierarchy and approached my role from that mindset, leading me to act too expert for too long. For example, I frequently struggled

to avoid immediately correcting any misconceptions about our course readings. However, I think peer-led discussions can still be valuable for tutors, especially if explicit opportunities for reflection are built into the course. The model of peerness provided by experienced tutors need not be perfect; new tutors can still have a valuable experience reflecting on how they might function collaboratively in their own sessions.

Based on our interviews, class experiences, and the degree to which new tutors have stepped forward to take responsibility in our center, my director and I are confident our new tutors benefitted from the advice and examples I could provide based on my direct experience with students at our university. But beyond these benefits for new tutors, I found leading discussions in our tutor education class beneficial for me as an experienced tutor. I gained a more nuanced understanding of the seminal texts of the field I had read as a new tutor when I reread them after spending several years tutoring. Discussing my experiences with tutoring gave me an unparalleled opportunity for reflection on my practice, ultimately improving my own tutoring. And I found engaging with new tutors tremendously enjoyable. If they are not already doing so, directors who desire to provide a rich professional experience like this for experienced tutors while helping new tutors internalize theoretical concepts may want to consider integrating peer-led discussions into their tutor education courses.



WORK CITED

Trimbur, John. "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1987, pp. 21-28.