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In Their Own ‘Write’’: A Portrait of the Peer Tutor as a Young Professional

Cynthia Onore

Cynthia Onore is a member of The Write Company, a private consulting firm, and a long time supporter of peer tutoring and writing centers. Anne Bonfiglio, Randi Hoffman, and Brendan Noonan are undergraduates at New York University. None of them is either an English major or pre-service teacher.

Initially I considered composing my own essay in order to describe how peer tutoring in writing at New York University came about, the roles played by the peer tutor in the already established Writing Center, and the techniques I used to train the tutors. But then the tutors wrote their own essays on some of these topics. They said what I'd wanted to say and more. So together we chose three of their essays which we thought best represented our collective feelings, the approaches we shared, and above all, our common enthusiasms for peer tutoring. These essays follow.

There are, however, a few facts and incidents I would have included in my essay which don't appear in the tutors' pieces. What their essays don't convey are the administrative agonies which accompany a new project of this sort. But, of course, the peer tutors neither witnessed nor shared in my frantic scuttling around in the Expository Writing Program office looking for customers for them. Without question, my behavior was out of the ordinary. After all, the staff tutors didn't find it necessary to beg and cajole tuteés to enter their cubicles and be served. But my trainees weren't staff tutors; they were undergraduates enrolled in an experimental honors section of a required expository writing course. In addition to the usual writing requirements for a composition class, this course also required the students to tutor each week for a few hours in the Writing Center, to meet with me for consulta-

tions about their work in their tutorial sessions, and to participate in ongoing training exercises in class.

I had sent out memos to the staff of the writing program, spoken at faculty meetings, and cornered friends in the corridors and the ladies room, all to publicize our new project and to drum up business. Still, for the first few weeks that my tutors were on duty, it was regularly necessary for me to persuade some instructor to dig out a piece of his or her own writing and take it to a peer tutor in order to give the tutor some experience. Undergraduates, it seemed, did not yet know about us or chose to stick with the staff tutors with whom they were already familiar and comfortable. Luckily all of this changed shortly and the tutors became quite busy.

By this time it is probably evident that my piece of writing would have dealt with the nuts and bolts of training and supervising, of administering the project. But the tutors' pieces are, I think, superior in many ways to the article I would have written. For them each exercise and every session was filled with excitement. The newness of it all sensitized them to the nuances of the one-to-one tutorial which I, an experienced and somewhat jaded tutor, might have overlooked. Anne, Randi, and Brendan can speculate about their experiences, hypothesize about the meanings of various interactions, and make connections between their tutoring sessions and their own writing and learning experiences in fresh ways. In short, they can fully participate in tutoring.

A caution is necessary here: Do not be fooled into anticipating that there is anything naive or immature about their insights. On the contrary, these essays represent precisely what makes peer tutors the best tutors. Unencumbered by "tried and true" methods, outmoded theories, and histories as teachers, these young people have little to unlearn. Additionally, however, they do not confront their tutorial experiences *tabula rasa*. What they bring with them is common sense, knowledge about their own composing processes, and a willingness to abandon rapidly what doesn't work in favor of whatever does prove useful. Their perspectives serve them well.

For instance, you will see that despite an initial unwillingness to suspend her disbelief, Anne's ideas are permeable enough to allow her to use new experience to create new knowledge. Randi, on the other hand, sees very quickly how much she shares with other writers. Her guiding spirit is one of community with all other composers. Brendan's situation is distinct. Although this may not be fully evident in his text, Brendan has an initial desire to rely upon formulas and set procedures. More powerful than this need, though, is his ability to let go of all of his

reliable strategies in favor of what actually happens in his sessions. He allows his instincts to tell him what to do.

For each of these students peer tutoring is a transforming experience. Anne gains an entirely new perspective on her own writing and learning. Even though she had been introduced to the writing process in previous composition courses, Anne had never engaged in revision until she began to see her own processes through the lens of someone else's. Her essay is a portrait of change—how we resist it, embrace it, and adjust to it. Anne is able to reconceptualize her role by changing from an English teacher gleefully wielding a red pen into a sensitive listener and responder sharing ideas and reactions.

From the start, Randi approached the tutorial sessions with an authentic sensitivity to the writer behind each text. Out of her own failures as a writer and the scars she carries from unresponsive teachers, Randi brought a kind and generous persona to every session. Perhaps the chief thrust of her experiences is the reinforcement of her intuition that writers are people too, even those for whom English is a second language. Randi's transformation lies in the building, however tentative, of confidence in herself as a language user. This seems to emerge from her recognition that talking can lead to writing. Whereas she may have customarily seen her own reliance on talk as a crutch, she sees talk as a mode which facilitates writing for all sorts of writers.

I don't believe that an experienced teacher could have done a better job of discrediting the recipe approach to instruction than does Brendan in his essay. Brendan clung to the strategies and techniques we practiced and discussed. All was well until he found himself on unfamiliar turf with an ESL student. These tutorial sessions thrust him into unfamiliar territory which he mapped intuitively by recognizing that at the core of each tutorial session is a conversation. Aided by the force of his own energy and insight, the session Brendan shares with us was transformed into a mode with which Brendan was most comfortable—a chat.

In many colleges and universities peer tutors are used for pragmatic though wrong-headed reasons. It is true that these tutors come cheap, but their cost should be only a minor consideration. Peer tutors are competent, eager professionals whose energy and openness can be nurtured and exploited by writing centers. The essays which follow present the case for peer tutoring more convincingly than I could have.

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**Essay C/Fourth Draft
Anne D. Bonfiglio/May 24, 1982**

The change in my understanding of the writing process and my own use of it that occurred as a result of my training to be a peer tutor in the Writing Center here at New York University has been dramatic. It has been so dramatic, in fact, that I wish with all my heart that I could claim that I knew what I was getting into all along and that the tremendous growth that has taken place was the result of my conscious, deliberate and wise choice. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth; I am a peer tutor because I participated in a training class for peer tutors, and I participated in the training class simply because it fit neatly into my schedule. Deliberately chosen or not though, my training as a peer tutor has left me with a new understanding of the writing process and a new level of writing skill.

The new understanding I have gained, and the facility in writing it has fostered, arose from the parallel actions of a four-pronged teaching approach in the classroom and a concurrent series of transitions from one mental state to another.

When I first learned that I was to be a peer tutor I was rather pleased. I had always wanted to help people with their writing and here was my chance. I pulled out my red pen and was ready. I saw myself as a savior, and gloried in fantasies of helping poor illiterate slobs see the light of thesis sentences, organization and clarity. How I would effect this illumination for my tutees was unclear to me but I was unconcerned. I considered myself an able writer, fully qualified to help others with less talent and knew that somehow, the method would be revealed to me.

While I was laboring, confidently, under this tremendous misapprehension, the first two phases of our training program were announced. We would all have to get acquainted with the tutoring process by being tutored and observing tutors in action, repeatedly, for three weeks. With my then attitude about tutoring you can imagine my reluctance to go. I'm not a poor illiterate slob, what could I possibly gain from being tutored? Explaining that it was necessary simply to allow me to understand what a tutoring session and being tutored are like, Cindy, our instructor, packed me off. And what a shock I received. No one corrected my writing. No one even had a red pen. Instead I found in my tutoring sessions people who wanted to discuss my writing. My tutors were acting as an audience, providing feedback on what they heard in my essay, enabling me to measure whether my aims in writing it had been achieved, and suggestions for new directions that occurred to them as they listened to the essay.

I found the same scenarios when I observed tutors. Through dialogue the tutor helped the tutee discover what her essay said, whether it said what she wanted it to say and whether it could be improved by exploring some other avenues. I was getting an understanding of tutoring from these activities. I was learning what a tutoring session really was. I had to acknowledge that it wasn't simply a remedial session but what could be helpful for anyone. A new appreciation for the drafting process was forced on me too. In the writing classes at N.Y.U. each essay goes through three drafts. Since I viewed each draft as a finished essay, I viewed this process as useless and unnecessary. I really didn't change much from one draft to another and, on the whole, resented having to rewrite. When I left my tutoring session, things looked different. I had lots of good ideas for changes to make in my essay. Rewriting it was a good idea; I needed a place in which to make my changes. And when I made them, the new draft was a great improvement over the first. My old images of tutoring and writing were slipping away; and new, radically different understandings were beginning to take their place.

It was at about this time that my mental state changed too. As I realized, through my experiences as a tutee and observer, what tutoring really was, I began to entertain terrible fears that I would be inept as a tutor. I had a strong sense of responsibility to anyone that might come to me to be tutored. If they came in, I felt I had to help them. But where would the questions come from? How would I know what to ask? Nightmare visions of myself and my tutee staring at each other in dumb, uninterrupted silence began to drift in my head.

The third phase of our training settled in at about this time as well. We began to read the literature of tutoring and collaborative learning. We read Thomas Carnacelli's "The Writing Conference: A One to One Conversation," an excerpt from Gregory and Elizabeth Cowan's *Writing*, a chapter, "Collaborative Learning" from Ken Bruffee's book, *A Short Course on Writing*, James Collins' "Speaking, Writing and Teaching for Meaning" and other excerpted articles including such titles as "Criterion Based Feedback and Reader Based Feedback", "Writer Based Prose: Function, Structure and Style", "The Writing Teacher as Dumb Reader" and authors such as Peter Elbow, Constance Weaver, James Britton and Nancy Sommers. The articles presented a range of ideas. One considered teaching writing with concentration on content rather than form, others a conference model for teaching writing instead of a classroom model, or different strategies for evaluating writing such as abandoning judging writing against pre-conceived criteria but instead just reacting to it as a reader. Some

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presented revision strategies, others proclaimed the value of spontaneous, non-reworded prose. We also read articles about experiences of other peer tutors. From the reading I gained a sense of why the tutoring session was modeled as it was. The format made sense now. And understanding the theory made utilizing it even more appealing. At the end of phase two of our training, although I was terrified about tutoring I was eager to get started. I felt like you always feel in the dentist's chair when he is waving some instrument above your open and waiting mouth. You're terrified but you want to get going so the terror will end and you can stop anticipating it. As I read this theory my feelings changed. I was calmer, just as when the dentist explains what the instrument is going to do you feel better though still afraid. The floor had fallen out when I observed tutors. The theory I read helped nail it back in and left me more eager than before. I sincerely wanted to draft and to obtain feedback. And I began to have a little confidence that if I relaxed, I might be able to give feedback to any tutees that might come in to be tutored.

When we started to tutor, in the fourth phase, the terror disappeared and the training paid off. As I worked with my tutees I was able to apply the theory that I had assimilated. A recap of my very first session is illustrative. Sitting in the Writing Center, all by myself at the beginning of my first hour there ever, I was vacillating between feelings of terror that a tutee would arrive and be an unwitting foil in a portrait of my ineptitude and hope that one would arrive so I could vent the eagerness I felt to apply my new found skills. With total disregard for my butterflies, I marched a teacher and a student. The teacher explained that Steve, the student, had missed class and needed some feedback on the first draft of an essay he had written and asked that I provide it. With that, the teacher left, and Steve and I set down to work. We did sit, in fulfillment of my fears, in dumb silence—for about thirty seconds. Then, recognizing that Steve wasn't going to go away, I reached into the bag of tricks and techniques that I had learned. Starting simply, the ideas came to me. "Fill out the forms," my mind shouted, "then have him read the essay aloud, and listen. When he's done tell him what you heard and how that made you feel." So I did. Steve read his essay. It was a comparison of an artist and a musician. I found as I listened that while the comparison Steve made was clear and interesting, it needed fleshing out. So when Steve finished reading I told him I felt that he was hitting me over the head and going too fast. I said that I really liked his comparison, what I could get of it, but that he was rushing me through it. In response to these comments Steve articulated his concerns about the paper, and rearticulated his comparison in the process. I said that

that was more clear, why hadn't he written it that way. We discussed this idea some more and then Steve left. My providing my response, how I felt as an audience, led him to talk about what he had written and get a sense of how he might want to alter the paper. When Steve had gone, I reflected on what had happened. I had had a questioning dialogue with a student on his paper. If he went home and did what he said he would when he left I could claim I had helped him. In other instances, although I found that I made mistakes, and not all my sessions were successes, I had similar experiences. I really felt that I was a help to my students and looked forward to seeing more of them and tutoring again. The terror was gone and replaced by understanding.

I could see, by now, the clear change I had undergone. My initial antipathy and disdain of the drafting process had been altered and replaced by a recognition and appreciation for its utility. I had gained an understanding that revision was always possible and that change could really be growth, not just cosmetic. I had learned that the Writing Center was not remedial but could be helpful for anyone. And, finally, I had learned how to provide meaningful help to other writers by being an attentive reader and feedback provider. To tell the truth, I still need to take a few deep breaths every time I review these changes.

What do all of these changes suggest? They all occurred as a result of the four-pronged experience I had in this class. Other students in the class have experienced similar transitions. We have all learned a lot. Many students could be exposed to a similar format of instruction. Certainly in other training programs for peer tutors the same methods could be used. There is room for them in beginning writing classes too. Attendance in a writing center once or twice as a tutee could be required. Reading materials on writing theory could be assigned. Students who were not going to be peer tutors could role-play as tutors in class. From any or all of these activities, students might learn as we did.

Working with ESL Students *Randi Hoffman*

I accidentally stumbled into becoming a peer tutor (I thought I had registered for a class in Modern Indian Literature) and was excited to begin, but I had no idea what to expect.

My first tutee turned out to be a girl from Korea, whose first language was not English. Even though we had eagerly practiced tutoring each other in my peer tutoring class, I didn't know if I was qualified to work with an ESL writer. Hyong came in very timidly and hesitantly, not knowing what to expect either, and read a paper covered with the teacher's green pen marks and a big green D at the bottom of the paper. Her paper reminded me of some of my own. A few days earlier I had come across an essay I'd written a while back that, like Hyong's, had a D on it. Just seeing it again got me so upset I barely paid any attention to what the teacher had written. So I sympathized with my tutee. I wanted to help her get past the horrible feeling of being inadvertently told you are stupid, and consequently never wanting to write anything again. The insensitivity of both teachers angered me. This is not teaching at all, I thought, but a form of humiliation. It does very little to help a student, and much to create writing anxiety and writing blocks.

Because I empathized with my tutee, I could help her to see that she was not stupid, that her ideas were good, and that she did have something to say. It didn't seem as if she had heard this too often. So she needed to develop the attitude that her paper was not a horrible, finite thing, and that she could look closely at it and make changes. Through the revision process it could emerge as a different and more complete essay.

The teacher's comment on Hyong's paper was "too general," a vague and ambiguous criticism. We decided that perhaps what the teacher meant was that Hyong needed to explore more specific reasons for her beliefs, give concrete examples and evidence, and go into more depth and detail.

A tactic that almost always helps to generate ideas and gets a person thinking is talking about the issues. Verbalizing makes ideas flow because the writer can hear out loud what does and does not make sense before thoughts are committed to paper. When we talk we organize and arrange our ideas and oftentimes see what order and angle are most effective. This is an easy way to experiment with words or to sort out the blatantly ridiculous. For Hyong, talking proved to be a way for her to realize how much she did have to say.

Hyong started opening up and talking freely. She began to go beyond what was written in front of her by elaborating on her feelings on the subject and exploring possibilities. I made her jot down her ideas so that she wouldn't forget them. Soon she felt much more confident about writing her next draft, and she certainly had an ample amount of material to draw from. At that point there was so much floating around in the air that she had no excuse for not putting some of it down on paper.

Getting someone to open up is usually easy. All that is required is to listen, respect what is being said, and question what is not clear. I was to realize that the skill involved in drawing writers out is a very important one in peer tutoring, perhaps the most important.

The type of strategy I used with Hyong had little to do with the fact that English was Hyong's second language. Native speakers of English often require the same thing, to have someone probe a little and help unlock their thoughts, to make words flow more freely.

On her next visit to the writing center, Hyong brought a much more coherent and well-developed essay. Seeing this second draft made me feel as if I had concretely helped her, and now our task of working with the conventions of English fell into place. After this session Hyong felt more confident about handing her paper in to her teacher.

Except for surface level difficulties, the problems this student had in writing were much the same as mine and other college level writers'. We all need more assurance, so that we can feel that our writing is worthwhile. Also, we all need to pin down what we are trying to say and give more specific examples. We need an audience to make sure that what we are saying makes sense outside of our own heads. Once we talk, none of us have any problems articulating our ideas, even if English is not our first language. Techniques that are successful with native speakers of English work equally well with ESL writers. For the most part Hyong, and others like her, need no special treatment for being ESL students.

Tutoring and Intuition

Brendan Noonan

Every tutor is likely to encounter situations where the usual rules cannot be applied; such a case occurred the first time I tutored an ESL (English as a Second Language) student. On my first day of tutoring I turned away an ESL student after the briefest of sessions; her quiet insistence was the only reason I worked with her at all. However, a week later, the same student was back, forcing me to learn about and handle some ESL-related problems on the spot. This, as I discovered, required some improvisation—and a heavy dose of intuition.

The student's assignment was to write a review; in the previous week's abbreviated session, I had to explain that very concept to her. Now she had a second draft, remarkably close to a real concert review, but not without flaws. The main problem with the piece was that the student had trouble explaining why she liked an aspect of the concert, or how the performer achieved a certain effect. Instead, she retreated into generalizations and safely vague words like "beautiful" and "happy."

The reason for this, I later concluded, was that explaining the whys and hows required some creative use of language and some involved descriptions. This, in turn, required a confidence with the language which the student had not yet acquired. And the cause of this verbal timidity was probably teachers, picking incessantly at weak grammar, faulty word usage, and quirky diction, all of which were present in the student's writing. Just looking at the paper in front of me brought that point home; mechanical corrections competed for space between the lines and in the margins. The fear of nitpicking made the student withdrawn even in discussing her writing, as if she were afraid I might start attacking her spelling errors.

Fortunately, another insight I gained through speaking with the student was that she understood shades of meaning very well when listening to spoken English. This allowed me to improvise a strategy; once I had gotten her to talk out a "why" or a "how," I could start firing off suggestions for phrasing an idea, and she would latch onto the one which conveyed her desired shade of meaning. The fact that the words came from my mouth rather than hers gave a feeling of security—I was the seasoned native speaker—while still allowing her to make a choice.

This may have been uncomfortably close to "telling" the student what to do with her work, and might have unduly emphasized the "teacher-student" relationship had it worked every time. Perhaps fortunately, the strategy was inconclusive at least once, allowing the stu-

dent to re-examine the problem later as an autonomous writer, while demonstrating that I was human, working *with* her on her level.

In any case, I found this strategy preferable to the alternative; asking the student how she would phrase something, and getting a long, blank, slightly panicky stare. Verbal confidence will come with time and experience; for the short run it was preferable to pursue the here-and-now problems of getting the ideas down on paper, and getting the student to trust someone in a nominally "authoritative" position. If these were the goals of the session, then I considered it a successful one.

Reluctance to experiment with the language is, I suspect, a common problem among ESL students, and my strategy was what I, being dumped in seemingly unfamiliar territory, started to do without even thinking about it very much. Therein lies the lesson to be learned from this session. The diagnosis, the setting of goals, the strategy devised—little conscious thought went into these. At the time I was operating on a pure, subconscious kind of intuition. The above analysis is based almost entirely on the long sorting-out process which occurred in the weeks after the session.

What kind of intuition was at work here? More than one kind, really, but it was primarily an intuition which transcends language boundaries and levels of literacy—the intuition of normal conversation. A conversation; that's what a tutoring session really is, and that's why this and every session I have participated in or observed has taken on a life of its own very quickly, leaving flow charts, procedures, and stock strategies far behind. Conversation by nature resists predetermined formulas, relying instead on the conversants' intuitive sense of the flow and strategies of everyday discourse.

In the session I have described, something that was lacking in the conversation first stirred my intuition towards a diagnosis; the unnaturally sparing use of language was evident not only in the student's writing but in her speech. As the session went on and strategy emerged, the unspoken conversation of facial expressions and body language told me when the student was drawing a blank or had little to say in answer to a question. The same clues told me when I had asked the right question: she would become more animated and eager to talk.

Normal conversational strategy also told me to pursue a productive line of questioning. And when I reached the suggesting stage, intuition told me not only when a suggestion was wrong, but to keep suggesting until I got it right. Again, there was little conscious thought; it all just happened.

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The lesson, then, is very simple. Outlined procedures and standard questions are not prescriptions for an ideal conference. They are first places to start, then fall-backs, things to try if that conference isn't taking flight. They are useful for keeping at the ready, but more important for the tutor is an open mind and a willingness to let the session flow where it might. There is really no such thing as a "routine" writing conference, so there is no point in suppressing the impulses of a conversation which might solve problems where formulas fail.