

1-1-1987

Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?

John Trimbur

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Trimbur, John (1987) "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1118>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?

John Trimbur

Over the past several years, I've asked the peer tutors I train and supervise to describe their initial expectations when they started tutoring. This request was at first a matter of personal curiosity, but I've found that their descriptions have given me some important leads in thinking about the aims of peer tutor training. Harvey Kail says that peer tutors teach us how to train them. I think he's right. Let me describe my tutors' expectations and what I think the implications are for tutor training.

The undergraduates who become peer tutors in writing centers begin with a combination of high hope and nagging doubt. For one thing, the tutors want to share their enthusiasm for writing with their tutees, to make their tutees into committed writers. Matt, for example, thought "my major objective would be to fire up my students to want to attack their writing assignments." This enthusiasm, of course, can lead to unrealistic expectations. "My expectations when I started tutoring," Ellen wrote in her tutoring log, "were to turn all the students I tutored into 'A' students." And at times this enthusiasm can take on a positively evangelical quality. Geoff thought his task was "to save the English language from apparently inevitable decline."

Mixed in with these hopes, realistic and otherwise, are the considerable doubts tutors feel about their ability to tutor effectively. They are often insecure about their mastery of rhetoric, style, grammar, and usage. Despite (or maybe because of) their good intentions, tutors aren't always sure they'll be able to help their tutees write better. This combination of enthusiasm and uncertainty is familiar to experienced writing center directors who train peer tutors. We all face the problem of making sure that peer tutors' initial

expectations don't backfire on them. I've seen it happen. Tutors are delicate mechanisms, without the protective coating and resiliency most of us develop as professionals. So there's the risk tutors' initial expectations will be shattered, leading to disappointment or even cynicism. When their hopes are not realized, when tutoring sessions don't go well or when tutees' grades don't go up, tutors may start to blame the students they work with. More often, the tutors blame themselves, and their feelings of inadequacy can turn into a debilitating sense of guilt about not getting the job done.

The problem, however, is not just the tutors' ego-investment. The problem concerns what the tutors have invested their energy doing. Tutors' initial standards for defining the aims and evaluating the results of tutoring are predictably conventional ones, informed by the prevailing reward structure that makes grades the central measure of success in higher education. It certainly helps to explain that peer tutoring is more interested in the long-term development of a tutee's writing ability than in the short-term results of any given writing assignment. As Stephen North put it so well, the job of tutoring is to produce better writers, not just better writings. But the mode of production tutors are most familiar with is the traditional academic mode of teaching and learning, a hierarchical structure in which the teacher passes down knowledge to the students and then measures how much the students received. This traditional model invariably shapes, to one extent or another, tutors' initial expectations—and can lead to considerable confusion about their work as peer tutors.

What is a Peer, What is a Tutor?

There's a certain irony operating here because the tutors' hopes and doubts about their work as peer tutors come in part from their own success as undergraduates. As a rule, tutors are highly skilled academic achievers: they are independent learners, they get good grades, they know how to "psych out" a course, they are accustomed to pleasing their instructors. Since they're used to performing successfully for evaluation, new tutors tend to measure learning by grades and to expect that tutoring will raise their tutees' grades, if not win them "A's."

At the same time, however, the traditional model of teaching and learning tells new tutors that they are not qualified to tutor, to pass down knowledge to their tutees. As any faculty opponent of peer tutoring will tell you, students do not possess the expertise and credentials—the professional standing—to help their peers learn to write. According to prevailing academic standards, faculty traditionalists are correct: peer tutoring doesn't make much sense. If anything, peer tutoring looks like a case of the "blind leading the blind."

Now most of us involved in writing centers have developed good arguments to counter our unreconstructed colleagues. Kenneth A. Bruffee makes a telling point when he argues that peer tutoring replaces the hierarchical model of teachers and students with a collaborative model of co-learners engaged in the shared activity of intellectual work. As writing center directors and peer tutor trainers, we may feel secure about the significance of collaborative learning and the way it redefines learning as an event produced by the social interaction of the learners—and not a body of information passed down from an expert to a novice. But for the undergraduates who become peer tutors, the insecurities linger. Rewarded by the traditional structure of teaching and learning, tutors have often internalized its values and standards and, in many respects, remain dependent on its authority.

In other words, new tutors are already implicated in a system that makes the words “peer” and “tutor” appear to be a contradiction in terms. How, many good tutors want to know, can I be a peer and a tutor simultaneously? If I am qualified to tutor, then I am no longer a peer to those I tutor. On the other hand, if I am a peer to my tutees, how can I be qualified to tutor? To be selected as a peer tutor in the first place seems only to confirm the contradiction in terms by acknowledging differences between the tutors and their tutees. The tutors’ success as undergraduates and their strengths as writers single them out and accentuate the differences between them and their tutees—thereby, in effect, undercutting the peer relationship. Appointment to tutor, after all, invests a certain institutional authority in the tutors that their tutees have not earned. For new tutors, the process of selection itself seems to set the terms “peer” and “tutor” at odds. It induces cognitive dissonance by asking new tutors to be two things at once, to play what appear to them to be mutually exclusive roles.

In practice, new tutors often experience cognitive dissonance as a conflict of loyalties. They feel pulled, on one hand, by their loyalty to their fellow students and, on the other hand, by loyalty to the academic system that has rewarded them and whose values they have internalized. On a gut level, new tutors often feel caught in the middle, suspended in a no-man’s-land between the faculty and the students.

The tutors’ loyalty to their peers results from their shared status as undergraduates. Both tutors and tutees find themselves at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. Tutors and tutees alike confront a faculty who control the curriculum, assign the work, and evaluate the results. This common position in the traditional hierarchy, moreover, tends to create social bonds among students, to unionize them. Undergraduates have always banded together to deal with the emotional and cognitive demands of college, and,

in one respect, peer tutoring simply institutionalizes and accords legitimacy to the practices of mutual aid students have always engaged in on their own.

But if peer tutoring programs are efforts by educators to tap the identification of student with student as a potentially powerful source of learning, peer tutoring can also lead to the further identification of peer tutors with the system that has rewarded them, underscoring the tutors' personal stake in the hierarchical values of higher education. New tutors feel not only the pull of loyalty to their peers. They may also feel the pull of competing against their peers and of maintaining the sense of cultural superiority the academic hierarchy has conferred on them. Tutors such as Geoff, whom I quoted earlier, may see themselves as missionaries on a crusade to save their college by bringing literacy to the masses. They may in fact wind up sounding like our most conservative colleagues. Geoff, for example, went so far as to suggest that the way the writing center could improve student writing was to picket the admissions office to raise entrance standards.

Now I don't mean to smirk at one tutor. All writing center directors have encountered peer tutors who are "bossy" and competitive know-it-alls unable to extricate themselves from the authoritarian attitudes and behaviors of the traditional academic hierarchy. Besides, at the other extreme are those peer tutors who use their superior learning, in this case out of loyalty to their peers, to co-author student papers, who cross the boundaries of the writing center and enter the realm of ghost writing and plagiarism. If you're like me, you may find the latter aberration from the norms of peer tutoring—a misguided sense of student solidarity—somewhat easier to correct and perhaps more forgivable. But the point is both instances threaten to subvert the educational promise of peer tutoring.

These aberrations, of course, are extreme, and happily they are rare. The vast majority of the peer tutors I've trained and supervised have handled the conflicting loyalties they experience with considerable grace and common sense. The usefulness of looking at these extreme instances is that they illustrate the social pressures peer tutors are likely to feel. In fact, we might say that to become a peer tutor is to invite these pressures. Peer tutoring invariably precipitates a crisis of loyalty and identity for the undergraduates who join the staff of a writing center. This crisis, I would argue, is a potentially fruitful one for students. And for writing center directors and peer tutor trainers, it is our unique responsibility to help tutors negotiate this crisis and put the terms "peer" and "tutor" together in practical and meaningful ways.

Models of Tutor Training

Let's take a look now at what peer tutors' initial expectations—the hopes and doubts and conflicting loyalties—suggest for tutor training. There is at

present a considerable body of literature and accumulated experience in training peer tutors. As Nathaniel Hawkins points out, this work contains a problem similar to the one I've just outlined. The dilemma for tutor trainers, Hawkins says, is "whether to emphasize the tutor's role [as peer and co-learner] or his knowledge of grammar and theory" (9). We have, on the one hand, a model of tutor training that emphasizes the tutor component of the equation. This model regards the peer tutor as an apprentice and often designs training courses as an introduction to teaching writing. The book list for such a course may well look like ones used in a practicum for graduate teaching assistants—Tate's bibliographical essays, *Research in Composing*, Grave's *Rhetoric and Composition*, and so on. The second model emphasizes the peer component. This model casts peer tutors as co-learners. Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan is no doubt the seminal influence here, with its focus on the dynamics of collaborative learning and on the peer tutors' activity as writers and readers. Its goal is not so much to produce expertise as it is to produce an experiential knowledge of the process of peer critiquing and co-learning to write.

Each of these models, of course, has something to recommend it. We want tutors to know about writing and to be competent in talking to their tutees about the composing process. At the same time, we want them to be capable of collaborating with their peers and of making their own experience in writing and receiving criticism accessible to their tutees. If the tutors are not well trained, they won't be able to help their tutees. But, as Bruffee argues, if they are "too well trained, tutees don't perceive them as peers but as little teachers, and the collaborative effect of working together is lost" (446). Maybe, then, we need what Marvin Garrett calls a "delicate balance"—just the right amount of expertise and theory mixed with just the right amount of peership and collaboration.

If you expect me, at this point, to offer a tutor training program that balances the peer and the tutor components, you're going to be disappointed. Let me explain why. At a recent conference on peer tutoring, a colleague suggested that the apparently contradictory nature of peer tutoring could be resolved by helping tutors develop the judgment to know when to shift roles from that of tutor to that of peer and back again. Tutoring, that is, is a balancing act that asks tutors to juggle roles, to shift identity, to know when to act like an expert and when to act like a co-learner. What seems to me the case, however, is that making role shifts or balancing contrary identities is precisely what peer tutors cannot do. Peer tutors do not possess a strategic ego center outside their experience as peers and tutors from which to maneuver—to make such shifts or to achieve such balances. Rather they are peers and tutors simultaneously. In fact, I would argue that we should think of the terms "peer" and "tutor" not so much as roles to be

played but as social pressures that converge on peer tutors, leading to the conflict of loyalty and identity crisis that inhere in peer tutoring. Tutor training, then, is not so much a matter of learning what roles to play as it is a matter of learning how to negotiate the conflicting claims on the tutors' social allegiances.

Training and Timing

The two models of tutor training—the apprentice model and the co-learner model—reproduce at the professional level the contradiction of terms “peer” and “tutor” that students experience at a gut level. The tilt of tutor trainers toward either the peer or the tutor component of the equation carries important implications not only for tutor training but also for the design and function of peer tutoring programs in writing centers. To follow the apprentice model and emphasize expertise and theory is to conceive of peer tutoring as an arm of the writing program, a way to deliver state-of-the-art instruction in writing to tutees. To follow the co-learner model and emphasize collaboration and experiential learning is to conceive of peer tutoring as a semi-autonomous activity that contributes to the formation of a student culture that takes writing seriously.

I don't pretend these two models can be easily reconciled. It may be the case, however, that the contradictory nature of the terms “peer” and “tutor” will make more sense if we stop talking about them in spatial terms, as roles to balance, and talk about them instead as a temporal sequence to be played out. I want to suggest a rather messy solution to tutor training that incorporates elements from both models but at different stages. What I have in mind is a sequence of tutor training that treats tutors differently depending on their tutoring experience—in short, that treats tutors developmentally. This developmental sequence would begin with a Bruffeesque approach to the peer tutors as collaborative learners. Given the way the traditional hierarchy influences new tutors' expectations and definitions of their activity as tutors, they initially need concrete and practical experience co-learning. Most peer tutors have had important experiences collaborating in everyday life but rarely in academic contexts. So they need practice if they are going to be effective co-learners. To my mind, this stage is the most significant because it demands that students unlearn some of the values and behaviors—the competitive individualism of traditional academics—that have already rewarded them and shaped their identities as students. They need, in effect, to relinquish some of their dependence on faculty authority and conventional measures of success (the source, we have just seen, of both their hopes and doubts as peer tutors) and to experience instead the authority co-learners invest in each other as they forge a common language to solve the problems writers face.

Tutors need, that is, to develop confidence in their autonomous activity as co-learners, without the sanction of faculty leaning over their shoulder and telling them and their tutees when something is learned and when not. For most new tutors, the terms “peer” and “tutor” come together in meaningful ways as tutors learn to work with their tutees, when together they jointly control their purposes, set the agenda, and evaluate the results of their learning—as autonomous co-learners outside official academic channels. It is this autonomous activity that creates the social space for peer tutoring and makes writing centers an extension of the social solidarity and collaborative practices in student culture.

To return to Kail’s remark about how peer tutors teach us how to train them, I must admit that often new tutors want me to teach them how to teach. They expect me to tell them what to do, to tell them what messages to send to their tutees, and to give them the methods to deliver these messages. But these questions are part of the old script, the script new tutors bring with them from their experience in the academic hierarchy of passing down knowledge. The initial stage of tutor training must address these expectations but indirectly, by structuring activities in which new tutors can gain experience co-learning. The point of tutor training at this stage is to resocialize tutors as collaborative learners within student culture. For this reason, I agree with Bruffee that tutor training must avoid producing “little teachers.” It’s important to see, though, that the problem is not just the half-truth that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. The problem is that knowledge is a powerful thing that aligns people with particular communities. To emphasize expertise in the initial stages of tutor training treats tutors as apprentices who are learning to join the community of professional writing teachers. I would argue that expertise in teaching writing is not so much dangerous as it is premature because it takes peer tutors out of student culture, the social medium of co-learning.

For me, tutor training is a matter of timing and community allegiance. The apprentice model of tutor training invokes a kind of knowledge—the theory and practice of teaching writing—that pulls tutors toward the professional community that generates and authorizes such knowledge. Instead of imparting the professional expertise of the community of writing teachers, tutor trainers need to tap and organize the native expertise of co-learning that is latent in the student’s own community of undergraduates. What I’m arguing is that we need to resist the temptation to professionalize peer tutors by treating them as apprentices and by designing training courses as introductions to the field of teaching writing. We need to treat peer tutors as students, not as paraprofessionals or preprofessionals, and to recognize that their community is not necessarily ours.

Through their tutoring experience, students may well gravitate toward the community of professional writing teachers, become interested in composition studies, and perhaps go on to graduate school and careers as writing teachers. Most of us involved in peer tutoring programs have seen this happen. In fact, tutors are in general so bright and articulate it is tempting to look at writing centers as recruiting grounds, not just for English or writing majors but for colleagues. My point here is simply that if experienced peer tutors do gravitate toward our profession, this should grow out of their own experience as co-learners in the semi-autonomous territory of writing centers.

Tutor trainers need to nurture the development of experienced tutors as much as that of new tutors, and advanced tutor training courses or practicums can help tutors deepen their awareness of the collaborative process of learning to write. Advanced training courses might well include composition theory and pedagogy, but this study should take place in a developmental sequence of the tutors' interests and purposes—the result of their experience tutoring and not a prerequisite to it. My worry is that the conception of tutoring as an apprenticeship treats students as extensions of our profession and can reinforce their dependence on faculty authority. To emphasize expertise at the expense of an experiential knowledge of co-learning risks short circuiting the dynamics of collaboration in student culture—the communities of readers and writers that are always in the process of formation when peers work together in writing centers.

Works Cited

- Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Training and Using Peer Tutors." *College English* 40 (1978): 432-49.
- Garrett, Marvin. "Toward a Delicate Balance: The Importance of Role-Playing and Peer Criticism in Peer Tutor Training." *Tutoring Writing*. Ed. Muriel Harris. Glenview: Scott, 1981. 94-100.
- Hawkins, Nathaniel. "An Introduction to the History and Theory of Peer Tutoring in Writing." *A Guide to Writing Programs: Writing Centers, Peer Tutoring, Writing Across the Curriculum*. Ed. Tori Haring-Smith. Glenview: Scott, 1984. 7-18.
- Kail, Harvey. "Collaborative Learning in Context." *College English* 45 (1983): 592-99.
- North, Stephen. "Training Tutors to Talk about Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 33 (1982): 434-41.

John Trimbur is Assistant Professor of Rhetoric, College of Basic Studies, Boston University, where he trains peer tutors in the Writing Center. He was a Fellow in Kenneth A. Bruffee's Brooklyn College Institute in Training Peer Tutors and has published a number of articles on peer tutoring, collaborative learning, and writing and literary theory. He co-founded and is currently president of New England Writing Program Administrators, is a member of the editorial board of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, and serves on the CCCC Standing Committee on the Professional Status of College Composition and Communications Teachers.