

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Song, Bailin and Richter, Eva (1997) "Tutoring in the Classroom: A Quantitative Study," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1379>

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Tutoring in the Classroom: A Quantitative Study

Bailin Song and Eva Richter

In general, writing tutoring programs fall into two major categories: the writing center model and the curriculum-based model (Kail and Trimbur). Although the curriculum-based model, often characterized by the providing of in-class tutoring, has gained popularity in practice because of its many advantages and potentials (Kail and Trimbur; Soliday; Soven), some theorists and writing center professionals argue ardently for the distinct identities and roles of classroom teaching and writing center tutoring from a political and ideological point of view (Harris; Healy; Kail and Trimbur; North). While theorists and writing center specialists debate the relationship of tutoring to teaching and are unable to reach consensus about a theoretical and methodological basis for tutoring practice, individual tutoring programs (whether writing center-based or curriculum-based) are obligated to examine their actual practices and evaluate their effectiveness in order to better define their roles and identities, clarify purposes, and modify practices. A review of the literature shows that although qualitative studies detailing the reports of program directors, faculty, tutors, and students are available (Harris; Held and Rosenberg; Masiello and Hayward; Soliday; Soven), quantitative studies that provide objective or more accurate assessment of the effects of different tutoring programs are lacking. It is to fill this vacuum that the authors undertook to study the Writing Center Tutoring Program at the Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York.

Kingsborough is one of six community colleges of the City University of New York. It serves an extraordinarily diverse population of about 16,000 students, and under its open admissions policy accepts

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 18, Number 1, Fall/Winter 1997



graduates of accredited high schools and students with a General Equivalency Diploma. According to the College's latest statistics, sixty-eight percent (68%) of all entering freshmen need some remediation in English.

The Writing Center Tutoring Program at Kingsborough is one which is structured into the writing curriculum of the English Department. Although the Writing Center does provide services to mainstream freshman writers when they use the Center voluntarily, its central purpose is to serve students in remedial and/or developmental writing courses. For each remedial writing course, the Writing Center assigns students to regular tutorial sessions. At a scheduled time on specific days, students meet their tutors in the Center located in the college's library for from one to three hours, depending on the course they are taking. Because tutoring is an essential part of the course, students are required to attend all tutorial sessions, and attendance is recorded and reported to the instructor.

The tutors working in our Writing Center vary widely in background and experiences. Some of them are students at Kingsborough; most are students or graduates of four-year colleges, graduate students, or members of the community, many of them retired teachers. However, they are all specially trained by faculty and staff members in weekly training sessions which are designed to give tutors knowledge of tutoring theories, writing center missions and methodologies.

The Writing Center maintains a complementary relationship with the English Department's writing program. It generates tutorial materials to supplement course instruction and, unless advised otherwise by the instructor of the course, works out a coherent program of tutorials for the semester. Because instructors of the writing program emphasize an organic approach in their writing classes, tutors are also encouraged to apply organic principles in tutorials, concentrating on such matters as prewriting strategies, development of ideas, multiple drafts and revisions, organization, and coherence. Distinctively different from the writing classroom teaching, though, is that tutorials at the Writing Center consistently involve small group and student-centered discussions, cultivate and maintain collaboration among students as well as between tutors and students, and provide a non-evaluative and non-threatening environment for students to talk about their writings and their critical concerns.

Problems arise, however, when for various reasons (the mutually exclusive schedules of instructors and tutors, general lack of time, etc.) there is little communication between the Writing Center tutors and the classroom instructors. Lacking specific direction, tutors may find themselves working on one technique or rhetorical feature, while the instructor spends a whole week concentrating on something else entirely. In such cases, students see no connection between what they learn in class and what they do with the tutors. Frequently, they report the lab to have been

a “waste of time,” and attendance falls off dramatically. Another problem arises when the tutor and the instructor have different methodologies and styles of teaching. Invidious comparisons follow, and students become disaffected as a result of what they see as conflicting instructions and goals. The question of the tutor’s authority also becomes a problem when the student sees the Writing Center as merely incidental and not integrally connected to the course. Such cases generate a morale problem which again affects attendance, and the students report the Writing Center and the tutors to be “unhelpful.”

The In-class Tutoring Program

Clearly, communication between the course instructors, the tutors, and the Writing Center itself is of paramount importance if students are to take full advantage of their tutoring time. Therefore, it was to ensure such communication, to create a clear connection between work done in the classroom and that done in the Writing Center, to define the purposes of tutors and the Writing Center work, to locate authority and to establish the collaborative nature of classroom instruction and tutorial support that the decision was made to put tutors into the classrooms to work along with the teachers. Such classroom participation is in addition to the tutors’ regularly scheduled sessions with the students in the Writing Center.

In the fall of 1993, supported by the Office of Academic Affairs of the City University of New York (CUNY), and in collaboration with the Writing Center, the Coordinated Freshman Programs at Kingsborough initiated the In-class Tutoring Program to attach tutors to writing courses. Although participation is voluntary, the writing program has seen rapid expansion over the past four years. For example, while only seven (7) sections, all of which were non-English as a Second Language (remedial writing), participated in the program when it first started, there were forty-one (41) sections, both ESL and English as a Primary Language (EPL), participating in the spring of 1995, out of a total of over ninety (90) sections running. Participating courses now include remedial and/or developmental reading and writing courses.

At the beginning of each semester, the Immersion Program sends a memorandum to all instructors, asking if they desire to have tutors in their classes. The Writing Center then assigns two or three tutors to each section whose instructor requests them. The classroom tutors are members of the regular tutoring staff of the Writing Center. In addition to the regular tutor training sessions mentioned above, classroom tutors receive specialized training dealing with their work in the classroom. Tutors are paid for their in-class service and their participation in training sessions at the same rate they are paid for sessions in the Writing Center. Their

assignments are generally based on the availability of their schedules, but instructors may request specific tutors with whom they have worked well. Although the Coordinated Freshman Programs and the Writing Center co-manage and co-supervise classroom tutors, they do not define their roles and responsibilities in the classroom. Instead, the instructor and tutors work together to decide how tutors will operate. In describing their specific activities in the classroom, many tutors report that they are most often involved in leading small group discussions, supervising mini-writing workshops, and conducting individual tutoring sessions or conferences. Although tutors occasionally have to work with students on grammar, it is not the major area of concern. Instead, tutors find themselves most utilized in activities such as brainstorming, developing and organizing ideas, critiquing, and revising.

In addition to attending classes once or twice a week, these tutors also conduct tutorials with the same group of students at the Writing Center—tutorials which are regularly scheduled and required for all remedial courses. In the Writing Center, their roles are no different from those of other tutors who work exclusively at the Center. What is different, though, is their added knowledge of what is going on in the classroom, their familiarity with the teachers' expectations and methodologies, and their improved working relationships with the individual students, all of which enable them to plan and design appropriate activities to reinforce and strengthen what students have learned in the classroom.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the In-class Tutoring Program, we surveyed the participating instructors at the end of each semester. In addition, we recently conducted a quantitative study to compare the writing performance of the students who were served by the classroom tutors with that of those who were not. The purpose of the quantitative study was to find out whether or not the In-class Tutoring Program enhances students' writing performance. In this article, we will report the results of the surveys of the instructors and of the quantitative study.

Benefits of Tutoring in the Classroom

According to our qualitative surveys, instructors who have participated in the In-class Tutoring Program are all very satisfied with their collaborative experiences with classroom tutors. "Mature," "competent," "cooperative," "helpful," "effective," "caring," "interested," and "motivated" are some of the words used by the instructors to describe their classroom tutors. Acknowledging the tutors' significant contributions, all respondents indicate that they would appreciate having tutors in their classes in the future. Comments such as "I would happily and gratefully

participate in this program again,” “I would consider myself fortunate to have them [tutors] in my classroom again,” and “I am looking forward to having tutors in my classroom in the future” frequently occur in their survey responses. Many instructors recognize the tutors as an invaluable resource for the students and request an increase in the number of times for tutors to attend their classes.

The surveys reveal that, due to the availability of tutors, many instructors now use mini-workshops more often. They find that small group work is “much more effective” with the tutors’ help and leadership. When the tutors are involved in small group activities, students are more interested and involved, better focused, and thus able to get more things done.

Participating instructors see the in-class tutors as “a wonderful means of individualizing classroom assistance.” Some say that they can now confer individually with their students in class while the tutors lead small groups or circulate in the classroom on writing workshop days. Some report that both the tutors and the teacher are able to conference concurrently with individual students while the rest of the class works on a writing assignment. They feel that “the support services were enhanced by our frequent conferences.” Others have the tutors provide one-on-one help to the students. They think that “the tutors . . . make it possible to work with many more students individually in the class period.” One instructor elaborates her classroom experience with the tutors this way:

In my two English classes, I had the tutors work one-on-one with the students. I would correct/comment on a draft, return it for revision, and the students would work with their class tutors in revising it. After a while they began to look forward to the help and the viewpoint of another audience. . . . The students would sit apart with the tutors and go over their work, my comments, their revisions, peer reviews, self-evaluations, etc.

Another instructor explains her system like this:

Since I knew the tutors were coming on Tuesday, I would arrange to have several people and their papers ready for them. The papers were always 2nd and 3rd drafts, which I had read and written comments about. The tutors would then help revise . . . and often explain my comments and suggestions. Many students grew to appreciate and await the help.

Another important characteristic of the In-class Tutoring Program is that the tutors “bring a bridge between the writing center and class.” Work not finished in one place, such as unfinished papers, unexplored topics, partly-debated ideas, or half-digested technical concepts, can be continued in the other. Things learned in the classroom can be practiced and reinforced immediately in the Writing Center. “The carry-over from one site to the other was very beneficial to all of us—students, tutors, and me,” comments one respondent. “It allowed for seamless continuity and reinforcement of lessons and skills.” Thanks to this link, the instructors now receive reports from the tutors of students’ improved attendance and better attitude toward tutorial sessions. They also hear from the students more positive comments about their experiences in the Writing Center. Apparently, the classroom tutors play a critical role in bringing about these changes.

Our surveys indicate that collaboration and communication between instructors and tutors is crucial to the success of the In-class Tutoring Program. According to the instructors, tutors cooperate with them by “meeting regularly” outside of class, “co-planning activities,” “contributing ideas,” serving as “another audience” in the classroom and “providing the feedback.” While the instructors plan lessons “with the tutors and their input in mind,” the tutors also take the instructors’ teaching plans into consideration when they design and prepare activities for their tutorials in the Writing Center. Instructors report that they have benefitted greatly from the collaboration. Because tutors “usually got to know the students personally,” they became “familiar with the needs of the individual students.” So, often instructors and tutors “would discuss a particular student’s problems and/or progress and what we could do to help.” As a result, “their [tutors’] insights into the strengths and weaknesses of our students provided an invaluable directive for the instructional plans.”

Some instructors consider in-class tutors a must in today’s political climate. Considering the size of today’s classes, they insist that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve their instructional goals without the help of those tutors. Because the tutors’ “huge help” is available, the instructors do not hesitate to give students a large number of writing assignments. In addition, having feedback and instruction from both the tutors and instructors “enabled the class to move much more quickly toward the goals.”

Turning the class over to the tutors is another practice that some instructors occasionally engage in. They think that letting tutors teach a class once in a while empowers them. It helps them build self-confidence, establish authority, and strengthen students’ trust. One instructor said she turned the class over to her tutors in order to free herself “to participate in

the classroom experience as a ‘student’.” This exposed her students to different teaching styles and helped create a non-threatening classroom atmosphere that encouraged free exchange of ideas—even the instructor got called on to read her writing. Her students commented that they benefitted from her responses as a student.

Finally, instructors reiterate the necessity of using tutors as “another audience” for the student’s work in the classroom. By often getting different and sometimes conflicting comments and feedback from the instructor and tutors, students come to realize that no one but they themselves are the ultimate authorities for their own writing. It is a great learning process for them when they are forced to work through those comments and feedback and make their own decisions about how to refine their multiple revisions. One instructor puts it into perspective as follows:

The students sometimes balked over a variety of writing feedback styles, no matter how subtle the differences. However, I think it is vital that 93 [highest level of developmental writing sequence at Kingsborough since the fall of 1995] students experience more than one professional approach to writing development; we can only hope that this process will lead them to the necessity of their own discovery.

The Quantitative Study

In order to obtain a more accurate and objective assessment of the effects of the In-class Tutoring Program, we needed to find out whether or not the classroom tutors have really made an impact on the students’ writing performance. So, we decided to compare the writing performance of the students who were served by the program with that of those who were not.

English C2 sections that were offered from the fall of 1993 to the spring of 1995 were used for our study. English C2 was chosen because it was the highest level of our developmental writing sequence and exit from this basic writing course, until the spring of 1995, had been determined solely by scores on the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT)—a timed, impromptu, persuasive essay scored on a six point scale. The WAT has been the only writing test administered throughout CUNY to determine readiness for freshman composition courses. We wanted to know if, with the help of tutors available in the classroom, the pass rate of English C2 would be significantly higher. In addition, we wanted to look further into the students’ performance in their subsequent freshman composition course, English 22, to see if the In-class Tutoring Program

had any long-term effect on students in the process of learning to become effective writers.

To compare the pass rates of English C2, we included in the study all sections (49) that participated in the In-class Tutoring Program from the fall of 1993 to the spring of 1995 and a matching number of randomly selected English C2 sections that did not take part in the program. From the 49 participating sections, 220 students out of a total of 991 were randomly selected as subjects of one group; from the 49 non-participating sections, 217 students were selected, also randomly, from a total of 976 students as subjects of another group. Students in either group with a grade of INC or W were excluded from the subject drawing process. We also made sure that all sections had the same proportionate representation of subjects.

In comparing the pass rates of English C2, we found that the group of students served by the In-class Tutoring Program had a higher pass rate than the group of students who were not served by the program. Specifically, 143 (65%) of the 220 sampled students who had classroom tutors passed the course as compared to 117 (54%) of the 217 students who did not have in-class tutors. The difference is statistically significant using *z* test for proportions ($z = 2.36, p < .01$). This result indicates that students who had classroom tutors available to them in English C2 had a better chance of passing the course.

We then looked into these students' academic records to compare their performance in English 22, the subsequent freshman composition course. We noted that there was a significant difference in the number of students who had taken and completed freshman composition. Of the 143 students who passed English C2 with in-class tutors available in the course, 105 (73%) had taken and completed English 22 at the time of the study while only 63 (54%) had done so among the 117 students who passed English C2 without the services of classroom tutors. Two factors may explain the difference: the In-class Tutoring Program may have produced a better overall college retention rate and a lower course withdrawal rate among the students who were helped in this way; the In-class Tutoring Program may also have improved these students' self-esteem and confidence about their preparation and abilities, resulting in more students daring to attempt the next writing course.

Another interesting finding was that students who had in-class tutors in English C2 earned better grades in their subsequent English writing course. For example, the group of students whose classes participated in the In-class Tutoring Program had about twice the percentage of students receiving an *A* as the other group, but its percentage of students receiving an *F* was less than half of that of the other group (see Appendix 1). The *t*-test of the equated grade means for the two groups also

confirmed a significant difference ($t = 2.75$, $df = 166$, $p < .01$). In other words, on the average, students who had in-class tutors in their developmental writing course did better than other students in their subsequent freshman composition course.

Conclusion

The In-class Tutoring Program at Kingsborough has been very successful. It has made a significant impact with both immediate and long-term effects on students' writing performance. As supported by statistical data, students who received the assistance of classroom tutors when they took the remedial writing course tended to have a higher rate of passing it. In addition, they did better after they exited from the remedial sequence, since more students took and completed the subsequent freshman composition course and earned better grades in that course.

When considering the reasons for the success of the program, we note several important points which support the findings of several earlier studies, such as those of Held and Rosenberg, Soliday, and Soven. As confirmed by the instructors' survey reports, in-class tutoring ensures communication between the instructors, the tutors, and the students and creates contexts for collaboration between the faculty and tutors. It establishes a clear connection between the classroom teaching and writing center tutoring, thus helping to strengthen writing instruction and increase the use of the writing center's services by the students. Moreover, although there is a consensus that one-on-one instruction is a unique characteristic of the writing center tutoring (Hemmeter 40), it is by no means its patent right. With in-class tutors available, the pedagogy can be applied effectively in the classroom to provide needed individual attention to the students.

All in all, assigning tutors to the classroom clearly has more practical advantages than keeping them solely in the writing center. The in-class tutoring has proven its effectiveness for our students. However, our findings are the result of only one study based on an urban, non-residential, multicultural campus. More studies are needed to examine tutoring programs in a variety of educational institutions to provide information on their effects.

Appendix 1

Distribution of Frequencies and Percentages by Group and Eng 22 Grade

| Eng 22 Grade (Equated) | Group | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--------|-------------------------|--------|
| | With In-class Tutors | | Without In-class Tutors | |
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| A (4) | 28 | 27% | 9 | 14% |
| B (3) | 40 | 38% | 20 | 32% |
| C (2) | 22 | 21% | 17 | 27% |
| D (1) | 5 | 5% | 4 | 6% |
| F (0) | 0 | 10% | 13 | 21% |
| Total | 105 | 101% | 63 | 100% |
| <i>Grade Mean (SD)</i> | 2.68 | (1.20) | 2.12 | (1.34) |
| t | | | 2.75 | |
| p | | | 0.007 | |

* The number is larger than 100 due to rounding errors.

Acknowledgement

Funding for this study was provided by a grant to the Coordinated Freshman Programs through the Office of Academic Affairs at the City University of New York. The authors wish to express their thanks for this support.

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