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## What Being A Writing Peer Tutor Can Do for You

by Kenneth A. Bruffee

Keynote Address, 25th Annual National Conference  
on Peer Tutoring in Writing.

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, October 19-21, 2007.

Good morning. It is a great pleasure to be invited to speak to you today. I want to talk about something you have probably already given some thought to. It's what you yourself, personally, get out of being a writing peer tutor and can take away with you when you graduate from college. What I have to say has four parts.

The first part is that what you learn as a writing peer tutor can be as important to your college education as your class work and your extra-curricular activities. You learn things as a writing peer tutor that you can use when you go to graduate school or medical school or law school, when you get a job, and when you become just plain old garden variety citizens along with the rest of us. As a writing peer tutor, you learn things that can serve your own future and maybe serve your families, your towns, your nation, and maybe even, sometime down the road, your world.

To start with I want to make sure you and I are on the same page about what's really good about being a writing peer tutor. I think peer tutoring writing is a great thing to do because the educational enterprise you are engaged in as a writing peer tutor is both valuable *and* important. It's valuable and important, because it involves collaborative learning and several other kinds of human interdependence. That is, being a writing peer tutor is related to all kinds of productive relationships among human beings. Your tutees learn from you, you learn from your tutees, you learn from the writing peer tutors you work with, and they learn from you.

There is of course a difference between being valuable and being important. Something is valuable if it's useful, reliable, and worth the price. Writing peer tutors are useful, obviously, because so many college students have trouble learning to write well, and you help them do that. People know you're reliable, because you are

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nice people whom they can depend on to help them. And writing peer tutors are worth the price. You never get used up. You keep regenerating yourselves. That's how peer tutoring works.

Here's what I mean: Peer tutoring is a kind of craft. When you begin, an experienced writing peer tutor shows you how to go about it, keeps an eye on you, and answers your questions. Eventually, you learn by practicing the craft yourself. As an experienced writing peer tutor, you learn even more by handing on the skills of the craft to others, helping them learn how to go about it. Someday they will hand on the craft to still others, and so it goes. It's gone on that way already for 25 years and more. Writing peer tutors serve in many ways as self-regenerating organs of college education.

That's not the only reason writing peer tutors are worth the price. For any college or university, a peer tutoring program in writing is a first-rate investment. Set one up today, and the odds are good that it will still be going strong 25 years from now. The market in writing peer tutors doesn't fluctuate much. Helping undergraduate students learn to write well is as important to a college as green grass on the quadrangle, and it usually costs a lot less to maintain.

Second, although peer tutoring in writing is valuable, it is a lot more than valuable. To peer tutor writing is important. Something is important because it stands out, is significant, and is influential. Writing peer tutors certainly stand out. We're all here today, because so many colleges everywhere have peer tutoring programs in writing. And your work is certainly significant because so many students feel that the help of writing peer tutors is priceless. Once in a while one of them tells you that. It makes your day, doesn't it?

But *are* writing peer tutors *influential*? You sure are. Peer tutoring writing has influenced American college education for—what is it?—more than 25 years. As a writing peer tutor, you influence how your tutees go about their studies, and you influence how they feel about themselves. And believe it or not, writing peer tutors have even influenced the way some teachers teach writing. But the greatest importance of being a writing peer tutor is that being a writing peer tutor influences *you*.

Being a writing peer tutor influences you because peer tutoring writing is a helping, care-taking engagement. It broadens your understanding of your own and your fellow students' value and the importance of both of you as human beings. Sitting down with a tutee is not just going to work. It's a gesture. Gestures say things just as words do. When you begin as a peer tutor, it may not occur to you right away that what you *do* says something, just as what you *say* says something. But as the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing's Peer Tutor Alumni Research

Project has shown, when you've been at peer tutoring for a while and the job is not so new to you as it was, your self-confidence increases. You relax a bit, you have time to think about what you are doing as a writing peer tutor. As a result, being a writing peer tutor becomes more meaningful to you.

Here's some samples of what you might be thinking. I've borrowed them from the work of a professor at another Pennsylvania college down the pike, Goucher. Her name is Barbara Roswell. A few years ago, Barbara did an ethnological study of what writing peer tutors do. Ethnology is the study of how groups of people, such as us here, develop socially and culturally. Barbara listened to peer tutors, watched them work, interviewed them, read their journals, read what tutees wrote, and read loads of student writing done in courses throughout the college. Her study led to many insights into the craft of writing peer tutors: what you do, how you do it, and why. Here are two of her insights that I thought might interest you.

One thing you do as a writing peer tutor is help students understand what professors are asking them to do. Often that's writing a position paper, the familiar, conventional say-something-and-then-explain-and-defend-it routine. You help your tutees to write in one of the ways that you have already learned to write. Granted, that may not be everyone's favorite part of the job, but it's a very important part. The rationale for teaching that kind of conventional writing is of course survival. Doing well in college and graduate school (and getting a good job and keeping it after graduation) often requires the ability to write papers, briefs, and memos.

Another of Barbara's insights is that spending a lot of time talking with tutees about writing is just as important a part of a writing peer tutor's job as helping tutees plan their position papers. You and your tutees talk together, just as you and your fellow writing peer tutors talk together, about all kinds of things about writing. You talk about everyday stuff—like what somebody likes and hates about writing, the hour of the day (or probably night) when people like to write, and the kinds of places somebody likes to be in when they write. And then, sometimes, you get to the root of things. You talk about what people want to be able to write, what somebody likes best to write, what they want most to achieve when they write, and how they hope to go about achieving it. In those kinds of conversations, you, your peer-tutoring peers, and your tutees learn a lot.

Third, when you talk with your tutees about all those kinds of things, what your tutees learn increases the value and importance of peer tutoring writing by compounding social and intellectual engagement. In most cases, that comes as something quite new to them. You are telling them that *writing is a personally engaging*

*social activity*. You're saying that we never write alone. Writing opens doors into worlds of conversation with other writers, with readers, and with yourself. Writing is a form of civil exchange that thoughtful people engage in when they try to live reasonable lives with one another. Writing is a way of caring about people, and sometimes it's a way of caring for people, too. We may write to and about people who are nearby or people far away, or even people who are no longer living.

That is the most important lesson you learn by being a writing peer tutor: that writing is a personally engaging social activity. What you are learning as a writing peer tutor is part of the craft and essential characteristics of human interdependence. "Interdependence" is an unusual word. *Interdependence* directly contradicts its opposites, which are *dependence* and *independence*. *Dependence* and *independence* divide people. *Interdependence* draws people together. *Interdependence* denotes people's inevitable and necessary dependence on one another. Sometimes, under some conditions, every one of us will have to count on somebody else. And everyone expects that sometimes, under some conditions, somebody else will be counting on us.

Among people who recognize each other and share familiar kinds of social background and beliefs, it is obvious that they have to be there for each other. But being there for other people is not so obvious among people who don't recognize each other and who see each other as strangers. Regionally, nationally, and globally, survival of *everyone* depends on acknowledging the necessity of human interdependence, understanding its characteristics, complexities, and satisfactions, and becoming adept in its craft.

That's where being a writing peer tutor comes in. Your conversations with tutees, introducing them to writing as a personally engaging social activity, also introduce them to the inevitability and necessity of human interdependence. So, when you talk with tutees about writing, you hand on to them some of the craft of human interdependence that you gain as a writing peer tutor.

That is my final point. That wonderful gesture, handing on to your college peers something as valuable and important as the craft of human interdependence, is what you get most out of being a writing peer tutor and take away with you when you graduate from college. It's the bottom line. Well, it's not quite the whole bottom line. There is one more chapter to the story, one I suspect you have thought about, and if you haven't, I'll bet someone in your family has thought about it.

Here's the story. In 1990, about twenty-five years ago, just about the time that Ron Maxwell and his colleagues were organizing this conference for the first time, a professor at Harvard, Richard Light, surveyed liberal arts alumni throughout the

United States. He asked them how they thought colleges could improve the quality of undergraduate education. Their reply was that “the best thing colleges could do for students in coming years would be to train them how to engage in group efforts productively.”

Then, ten years later, about the time some of you were entering high school, a computer scientist at the Xerox research program in Palo Alto, John Seely Brown, and a cultural historian at Berkeley, Paul Duguid, published a book that confirmed Light’s results. Their book is called *The Social Life of Information*. It refutes the commonplace understanding that computers increase efficiency and productivity. Brown and Duguid say it’s not so. They show that the most efficient and productive people are not the rugged individualists taking on the future heroically alone. The people whose work is most efficient and productive are those who “know each other and work together directly [in] face-to-face communities that continually negotiate with, communicate with, and coordinate with each other.”

What Light, Brown, and Duguid together tell us, furthermore, is confirmed, as so much else is these days, by statistics. Somebody in your family—and maybe even you yourself—will surely find it gratifying to learn that in 2006, a survey called *Are They Really Ready to Work?* listed skills that employers look for in the college graduates they interview. The first skill on the list is something you are pretty familiar with as writing peer tutors: “communication,” meaning, of course, reading and writing—always first on almost everyone’s list. Of the twenty skills that employers look for, ranked second after “communication” is “teamwork and collaboration.” What employers in business, industry, education, medicine, law, communication—you name it—are looking for are the ability to write well and the ability to work well with others. The Peer Tutor Alumni Research Project confirms it, too. Responses received from people like you, who were writing peer tutors themselves five, ten, twenty years ago, say decisively that what you gain as a writing peer tutor prepares you to enter the working world successfully no matter what occupation or profession you undertake.

That is why my thesis today has been that thoughtful young people like yourselves who are looking ahead to your future have a lot to get out of being writing peer tutors. You can learn things that serve you personally and professionally and that give you a background that will help you serve your families, your hometowns, your nation, and, sometime maybe, *our* world.

I am confident that, in your own way, you will do just that.

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