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## Peer Tutors and the Conversation of Writing Center Studies

Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald

This special issue of *Writing Center Journal* reflects not only the recent interest in undergraduate research but the good work that peer tutors of writing have engaged in for the last several decades—as well as writing center scholars’ awareness that these contributions to the field need to be recognized. Following the interest in undergraduate research in the sciences and other disciplines in the 1970s and ’80s, the new millennium has seen an increased support of student inquiry in the humanities through the growth of the Council on Undergraduate Research and related activities (Grobman and Kinkead xii-xiii). In writing studies, this focus is perhaps best demonstrated by the unprecedented rise of the journal *Young Scholars in Writing* followed by *Xchanges* and *Queen City Writers* (which you can learn more about in the announcements section of this issue).

We confess, however, that focusing on the disciplinary knowledge that undergraduates produce strikes us as not particularly new. Almost thirty years ago, in “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Kenneth Bruffee implicitly positioned undergraduate peer tutors as practitioner-researchers when he asserted that “peer tutoring is one way of introducing students to the process by which communities of knowledgeable peers . . . create knowledge” (12). In turn, the field has excelled at providing tutors with venues for sharing the knowledge they create. In 1984, the same year that Bruffee published his foundational essay, both the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing and the Rocky Mountain Peer Tutoring Conference convened for the first time and *The Writing Lab Newsletter’s* “Tutor’s Corner” (now “Tutor’s Column”)

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became “Perhaps the earliest concerted effort to publish the work of undergraduates in English studies,” as Laurie Grobman and Joyce Kinkead note (xix). Since then, regional, national, and international writing center conferences have hosted presentations by hundreds (maybe even thousands!) of student tutors, and even more tutors have shared their work locally, in writing centers and programs around the world. For all of these reasons, it’s easy to agree with Kinkead’s assertion “that undergraduates who tutor are the most likely authors of scholarly and research essays” in writing studies (150).

As scholars in our field recognize, just as important as establishing these venues for tutor research is attending to the insights this work offers. In 1999’s “Lessons of Inscription: Tutor Training and the ‘Professional Conversation,’” for example, Peter Vandenberg shares his concern that “the collective ‘we’ of our professional discourse is groping towards [our future] without a great deal of regard for the largest contingent among us—our student tutors” (60). Vandenberg goes on to explain the ways in which the rising professionalism of writing center studies—a disciplinarity founded in rhetorical and educational theories—disciplines our peer tutors, who “remain oddly suspended in this economy . . . as the informed rather than as informers” (64). And even while Vandenberg offers a compelling critique of the sanctioning effects of disciplinarity, in 2003 Sue Dinitz and Jean Kiedaisch suggested that little had changed in four years, that still “Largely left out of th[e] theoretical constructions of writing centers are tutor voices” (63). More recently, in his keynote for last fall’s NCPTW, Brian Fallon (who began his writing center career as an undergraduate tutor and, as a graduate student, published “Taking on Turnitin: Tutors Advocating Change” in *WCJ* with undergraduate tutors Renee Brown, Jessica Lott, Elizabeth Matthews, and Elizabeth Mintie) called on us all “to pay more attention to peer tutors, to what they tell us about learning, teaching, and writing, and to what they bring to our scholarly conversations in the writing center and composition studies fields.”

If we pay attention to the peer tutors whose research is collected in this issue, for example, we stand to learn a great deal—about tutors’ informed and informing perspectives on the conversations of writing center studies; about what tutors believe should be next for the field

and for the practices of writing centers, writing fellows programs, and writing classrooms; and, most important, about what their fellow student writers need. In “Got Guilt? Consultant Guilt in the Writing Center Community,” for instance, Jennifer Nicklay contests the kind of inscription Vandenberg notes, in this case the impact of the North/Brooks legacy of minimalist tutoring as well as academic culture on tutors’ feelings about their work. Similarly, Miriam Gofine, in “How Are We Doing? A Review of Assessments within Writing Centers,” surveys a professional conversation that sets many an administrator’s teeth on edge and, undaunted, offers concrete suggestions for improving future assessment practices.

Further, these articles show us what different research methods and data sets can reveal about our relationships with the writers we serve. Thus, in “The Power of Common Interest for Motivating Writers: A Case Study,” Natalie DeCheck codes interview transcripts to investigate how the tutor-writer bond can affect a writer’s motivation. And in “What a Writer Wants: Assessing Fulfillment of Student Goals in Writing Center Tutoring Sessions,” Laurel Raymond and Zarah Quinn analyze tutor session reports to address the (mis)match between writers’ goals and tutorial agendas. Revealing profound concern for ways we can better help these writers, Frances Nan, in “Bridging the Gap: Essential Issues to Address in Recurring Writing Center Appointments with Chinese ELL Students,” Christian Brendel, in “Tutoring Between Language with Comparative Multilingual Tutoring,” and Bethany Bibb, in “Bringing Balance to the Table: Comprehensive Writing Instruction in the Tutoring Session,” draw on a wide range of research to offer specific advice for tutors, directors, and writing instructors to make our services the most accessible and most productive that they can be.

As the variety of topics addressed in this issue indicates, there are no conversations in writing center studies that peer tutors cannot fruitfully address—and, as the review process for this issue demonstrated, there is no constituency among the readership of *Writing Center Journal* that is not interested in hearing these voices. We want to give a special word of thanks to the peer tutors and writing center professionals who read through the abundance of

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submissions and who had the unenviable job of selecting the essays here from that remarkable bounty.

And a bounty it is, indeed. There is much we can learn from tutors through the publications in the field—just as we learn from the tutors and writers in our centers every day. As Fallon said in his keynote, “what twenty-first-century peer tutors bring to . . . conversations about tutoring has the capacity to dramatically change not only how tutors are educated but also how we teach writing, how we think about learning, and how we value our relationships with each other and the knowledge we build together.” We think the essays here will inspire us all to draw more peer tutor voices into the conversation of the field, and we look forward to seeing where these tutor-researchers will lead us!

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