

Tutors in the SVC Writing Center: The Peer Tutor Model¹

The bulk of Writing Center research is focused not on faculty tutors but on *peer* tutors. For many reasons, the peer tutor model is not only the most viable, but has distinct benefits for those seeking writing assistance.

An important component the one-to-one model central to writing centers is the tutor-student structure, and writing centers in institutions of all levels use peer tutors. Gillespie and Kail (2006) declare that “Peer tutoring in writing instruction has earned a well-respected place in higher education...The systematic and now widespread employment of students to help each other become better writers has achieved the status of conventional practice.” **The peer-tutor model is good for students; it’s good for tutors; and it’s affordable.**

The peer-tutor model is good for students | Peer tutors bring a connection to the experiences of the students who seek help from the Center. Students who visit a center are less likely to be intimidated by a peer tutor; approaching a peer provides them a “safe” relationship. Harris (1995) noted that “it is stressful for [students] to talk about their writing with someone whom they perceive as having some institutional authority over them ... the collaborative atmosphere of the [peer] tutorial, the sense of being with someone who does not assume any authoritative posture, seems to relieve that strain and eliminate the fear” (p. 36). Jones (2001) reiterated this: “because peer tutors do not possess the institutional authority of composition instructors, their use reduces student anxiety and stress while facilitating open, collaborative interaction” (p. 13). Decades of practice have shown that well-constructed programs with well-trained tutors are extremely effective.

Some common concerns:

Are peer tutors—especially community college students—knowledgeable enough to help struggling writers?

Absolutely.

- Students who have been successful writers themselves and who have been identified (by their instructors and by the hiring process) as respectful of and interested in others’ ideas, as good at working with others, and as intellectually inquisitive, have been consistently shown in writing centers to be effective tutors.
- Gardner & Rousculp (2006) note that tutors can bring new ideas and have closer connections to lower division assignments, thus providing a closer peer relationship for lower-division students than other tutors might.
- The IWCA fully support the use of the peer-tutor model in two-year schools: see their “Position Statement on Two-Year College Writing Centers” (2007, January 25).
- A training class or program is essential to provide any tutor with the particulars of the one-to-one collaboration, and all peer tutors should be required to undertake such training.

¹ Excerpted and modified/summarized from “Proposal to Develop and Implement a Writing Center for Mount Vernon Campus,” Jennifer Handley, 2011.

Isn't there a risk that peer tutors will "take over" student work, disempowering the student writer and changing the writing itself so that it is "not the students"?"

No!

- Tutor training should emphasize the role of the tutor in a one-to-one collaboration: as an assistant, a guide, a writer who can help the student think critically about her/his assignment, ideas, and writing and who can guide a discussion that allows—that, in fact, requires—the student to discover and make decisions about the writing.
- The underlying goal is not just to improve the paper in question, but to help students become more confident writers who can more comfortably and successfully maneuver the writing process, from interpreting an assignment to checking for final errors.

Do peer tutors have the ability to tutor in specific disciplines?

Yes.

- Leahy (1990) explains: "Writing tutors must be even more flexible than other tutors. They work not only with students from all disciplines but with all kinds of writers, from the strongest to the weakest, from the most methodical to the most chaotic. They work with students engaged not only in a learning process but a creating process." (par. 38) Because of the focus on *process*, students not based in the discipline a student might be writing in can be extremely effective tutors.
- Sometimes the most effective conversation a struggling writer can have is with a skilled questioner who knows how to ask, "What are you trying to say? Explain it to me." This is what well-trained tutors know how to do.
- As Hubbuch notes, a tutor who is not a student of the discipline in which the writer is working is not "ignorant" at all, but "an individual with a logical, inquiring mind," able to guide student writers through the process of decoding the parameters of an assignment, discovering the style, organizational, and documentation conventions of the discipline, and uncovering and articulating the logical expression of the student's ideas.
- Harris (1995): The tutor is ideally placed to help the student sort out "which conventions and rules the writer is working with and when the writer has to return to the content teacher for clarification" (40).
- Specific knowledge/understanding of differences in conventions among disciplines should also be addressed in tutor training.

The peer-tutor model is good for tutors | Peer tutors are students, also, and the value to them of tutoring is great.

- Magolda and Rogers found increased intellectual maturity in students who worked in writing centers (as cited in Jones, 2001).
- Alsup, Conrad-Salvo, and Peters (2008) found working in a writing lab to be an "enriching learning experience[] for inexperienced college writers" (p. 333).
- SVC writing tutor Ariel Chrysler's experience gave her insight into both her tutees' needs— affective and compositional—and into herself. "I had been taught the writing process in my English classes, but tutoring ... reinforced what I had learned. When I tutored students my knowledge ... became even more concrete as I used this information often" she wrote in her final reflective paper. "Tutoring also helped me accomplish my final learning objective: *I will learn how to be sensitive to those I tutor.* ... Knowing that these students needed help was enough for me to keep my mouth shut until they finished explaining their frustrations ... Keeping quiet helped me be sensitive to their emotional needs and encouraging them to think helped me be sensitive to their practical needs" (Chrysler, 2010).

- Working as a peer tutor can improve the tutor's own approach to writing and academics and, in many cases, impact the student's life well beyond school.

The peer-tutor model is affordable | The peer tutor model has an additional benefit of cost-effectiveness.

- Full-time, adjunct, or non-faculty professional tutors command a professional wage (in dollars or in kind, in release time); student wages have a comparatively small impact on the budget, allowing for more tutor hours overall and a lower bottom line, while offering an educational opportunity.
- Gillespie and Kail (2006) agree: "Peer tutoring significantly adds to the staffing potential of a writing center, extending its range and influence while tapping into the financial support of such programs as federal and state work-study aide."

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