

Rewriting Across the Curriculum: Writing Fellows as Agents of Change in WAC Using Peer Writing Fellows in British Universities: Complexities and Possibilities^[1]

Peter O'Neill, London Metropolitan University

Abstract: This article examines the potential role of peer tutors and writing fellows in higher education in the United Kingdom. It argues that scepticism surrounding the use of peer tutors in writing is unfounded. In fact, the disciplinary nature of UK Higher Education suggests that undergraduate peer tutors and writing fellows may have an important role in helping other students to develop academic literacies and in promoting Writing-in-the-Disciplines initiatives among academic staff. It looks at recent initiatives in this area at London Metropolitan University.

Writing fellows schemes and undergraduate peer tutoring in writing are a feature of student and academic life on most US campuses. Universities in many other countries, however, have been slower to implement such initiatives to help students improve their writing. This is the case in the United Kingdom, where undergraduate peer tutoring in writing and writing fellows are largely unheard of by most academic staff.^[2] This essay looks at the potential role of such schemes in the UK context. I argue that writing fellows in particular may be ideally suited to the British disciplinary degree model and have a valuable role to play in bringing Writing-in-the-Disciplines initiatives to the consciousness of UK academics. I will also report on the activities of a program recently established at London Metropolitan University where a small number of undergraduates have been hired to work both as writing fellows and as "writing mentors" in a newly opened writing centre.

A potential obstacle to writing fellows schemes taking off in the UK is the faculty's reluctance to make use of students to help their fellow students with their writing. UK writing support practitioners have recently suggested that peer writing collaboration may not be appropriate in the UK context. Given the potential for controversy over this issue, reflection and research on this topic is imperative for all those concerned with teaching writing in UK universities. I hope that consideration of the contested nature of these issues in an international context will also be of interest to US scholars and teachers who take such programs largely for granted.

O tempora! O mores! Our students can't write!

In 2006, the Royal Literary Fund published *Writing Matters*, a report written by Royal Literary Fund Fellows, professional writers who have been working in various UK universities, offering one-to-one writing tutorials to students. The report is an attempt to expose what the Fellows see as a crisis in student writing. The tone borders on the indignant:

Across the Disciplines
A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing

wac.colostate.edu/atd
ISSN 554-8244

Across the Disciplines is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by [Colorado State University](#) and [Georgia Southern University](#). Articles are published under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license](#) (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2017 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site's authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

No optimistic gloss can be put on it. No artfully crafted explanation will work. Large numbers of contemporary British undergraduates lack the basic ability to express themselves in writing. Many students are simply not ready for the demands that higher education is making – or should be making – of them.... There may be debate about the causes, and about the prognosis, but there is unanimity about what the Fellows have seen. The single word that crops up more than any other in describing what they have found on entering higher education institutions is 'shock.' (Murray and Kirton, 2006, p. 7)

The tone of much of this report causes a certain unease. It is puzzling that those whose job is to help students with their writing should feel the need to be so shocked by it.^[3] Moreover, there appears to be a conservative tone to the report with its lament for the state of punctuation, for the lack of student reading and the unquestioned assumption that extensive reading and good writing must automatically go together. There is even a lament that the memorisation of texts is no longer encouraged among students:

To advocate the practice now might seem reactionary, but some writers have found such an exercise, either because it was forced on them at school or because they chose to do it themselves, to be a fine way of internalising good writing, of filling themselves with the music of language. (Murray and Kirton, 2006, p. 9)^[4]

The report also largely neglects the kinds of writing and reading that students do in fact do, little of which seems to attract the approval of the authors, who seem to have an out-of-date view of the internet and the world of Web 2.0:

Creating a living, organic whole is not the same as cutting and pasting blocks of text. The mental movement involved in negotiating the Internet, passing from hyperlink to hyperlink, is fundamentally different from the linear progression of the old-fashioned essay or trawl through the library stack. (Murray and Kirton, 2006, p.11)^[5]

The Royal Literary Fund's report is "a call to action to the higher education sector in relation to levels of student writing competence and skills across all disciplines" (p. vii). The dramatic tone of the report has certainly brought it publicity and sympathy from a British press that is always keen to report stories of cultural doom and decline.^[6]

Ignoring Writing

For well over a century, American universities have offered writing instruction and assistance for their students. By contrast, in British universities writing has, until recently, been simply ignored by most teachers. My own experience as an undergraduate and postgraduate student at an "elite" British university is probably not untypical. I can recall only two occasions when my writing was brought up as a subject worthy of comment. When my first essay was handed back to me, after my first week of undergraduate studies, my tutor inscribed a cursory "you write well" at the bottom of his remarks. This was just as well because there would have been no help available to me if it had been deemed that I did not write well. My second writing encounter was as a Master's student four years later. Clearly my supervisor did not think that I wrote particularly well, since he went through one of my chapters in great detail, removing all the superfluous words and rewriting great sections for me. This exercise, for all its pedagogical imperfections, at least made me aware that my "natural" way of writing could benefit from a spot of editing and that I should perhaps be less complacent about it.

There are a number of reasons for the UK universities' reluctance to assume responsibility for improving student writing. Above all, as is often pointed out (e.g. Ivanič & Lea, 2006, p. 7), UK universities have until recently operated in a highly elitist system, in which only the top 15 per cent or so of the nation's children

received a university education, an education which, if the students played their cards right, was almost guaranteed to whisk them off into the nation's governing and chattering classes. Under this system, it was always assumed that it was the responsibility of the schools to prepare the students for university writing. Students were expected to be able to write in their academic discipline before their degree commenced, and the rigours of the two-year A Level training in a particular subject were designed to ensure that they could do just this. If they could not, then the assumption was that they would not do well enough in their A Level examinations to be admitted to an elite university.

If some students nevertheless managed to make it to university with weak writing, it was seen as somehow better for their lecturers not to bring this up too much. After all, the poorly prepared student would probably be able to muddle through to the end of his degree and was unlikely to want to seek to join academia. In the world of Oxbridge colleges, it was doubtless seen as a bit unsporting and ungentlemanly to worry too much about these things and, of course, the Dons would have had very little idea how to speak about writing in a helpful way.^[7] And many departments outside of Oxford and Cambridge have traditionally been dominated by Oxford and Cambridge educated dons, who were unlikely to be any more interested in dealing with fundamental issues concerning writing than their ivory-tower colleagues.

A second reason for the institutional reluctance to deal with these issues may have been the fact that, on the whole, UK undergraduates did relatively little formal writing. Oxford and Cambridge students may have written their weekly essay, but this was traditionally a hand-written affair composed in a hurry and read aloud to the tutor rather than handed in for a careful reading. Brilliance rather than professionalism was encouraged, and students were free from pressures to cite their sources or worry about writing a good paragraph or articulating and developing a strong argument. Outside of the Oxbridge tutorial system, more professional writing was often expected, although lecturers were usually tolerant of hand-written rather than typed essays.

Moreover, very little of this writing counted for much in terms of assessment in a university system where final examinations largely determined the result of a student's degree. Good academic writing really did not matter that much. So long as students could perform adequately in a three-hour examination and get their ideas onto paper, no one was likely to worry too much about the niceties of academic writing or prevent a weak student writer from gaining a degree. And so universities could happily get away with not worrying about improving student writing and an unhealthy silence on the issue could be maintained. Of course, there would always be some students who simply could not express themselves. These students, lacking any serious help or support, often simply dropped out or perhaps struggled through and ended up being labelled "third class," according to the peculiar hierarchical classification system preferred by English universities.

But things have changed. Coursework has come to make up more and more of the assessment of UK degrees, at least outside of Oxbridge. This, along with the introduction of a modular system in many universities, has had repercussions for writing. A certain professionalism in writing is now expected in most UK universities, with word-processed essays handed in at the end of each module. And academic standards are expected in undergraduate writing, not least as a result of contemporary anxieties over intellectual property and plagiarism. Student writing is now more exposed than it once was and is often found wanting.^[8]

The most important change has come about because of the expansion of the universities. In the old manufacturing-based UK economy, the elite system of Higher Education doubtless performed its function well enough. However, with the decline of manufacturing and the rise of an increasingly globalized job market, it became clear that the economy needed a much more literate workforce (The Future of Higher Education, 2003, p. 58). A system of mass higher education was needed. In 1992, the polytechnics were allowed to become universities, and recently the government set a target of 50 per cent participation in higher education, a target which is still quite some way from being met in England (The Future of Higher Education, 2003, p. 59). This expansion has meant that the issue of inadequately prepared students has

become harder than ever to ignore, particularly as universities are also under pressure to take students from non-traditional backgrounds and to work towards minimising drop-out rates.

The expansion of universities in the United States was met with institutional responses to deal with inadequately prepared students and also to improve the learning experience of all students through enhanced attention to writing as a means of student learning. Writing Across the Curriculum, for example, is, according to Susan McLeod and Elaine Maimon (2000), "one of the most important educational reform movements of the twentieth century" (p. 582). WAC is a presence on most American campuses, impacting the teaching and learning development of faculty and students alike. However, most UK academic staff are unaware of or show little interest in this initiative. Similarly, they have probably never heard of Writing in the Disciplines or writing fellows schemes and even writing centers or writing classes mean very little to most staff teaching in the UK higher education system. Instead, writing support has been seen as the responsibility of study-skills or learning-development units, which must inevitably give much of their time and attention to working with struggling students rather than dealing with the more fundamental problems surrounding student writing.^[9] Academic staff tend to avoid getting their hands dirty, although they are often happy enough to lament the state of student writing, usually in coffee rooms but occasionally in outbursts in the professional press.^[10]

Academic Literacies and the Need for Talk

Professionals and academics in many universities' learning development and study support units have been working vigorously in this field for many years, and since the 1990s writing support in UK universities has become a growth area. But too often this work has been marginalised (Ivanič & Lea, 2006, p. 10) and has not had an impact on academic staff, many of whom still consider that their only responsibility towards their students' writing is to assign a mark to it. Despite this marginalisation, much vigorous debate has been taking place among the professionals and academics working in the field of learning development. Perhaps the richest outcome of this discussion has been the rise of Academic Literacies, a theoretical approach which aims "to move away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to consider the complexity of writing practices that are taking place at degree level in universities" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 157). Academic Literacies sees "literacies as social practices" (p. 159) and examines student writing not as a skill to be mastered but as an issue "at the level of epistemology and identities" (p. 159).

This approach offers insights into the kinds of writing that students do and it has helped to generate a much richer view of the complexities of university writing, expanding a discussion that has too often focused on surface issues such as correct grammar. It has also done a good job in bringing together under the same broad umbrella existing learning and study support staff and everyone else involved in teaching writing in UK universities. And it has not shirked from pointing out that these issues are the responsibility of all members of the university (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006, p. 4), even if not everyone has been listening to this message. However, as Theresa Lillis (2006) recently pointed out, while Academic Literacies has been "highly generative as a critical research frame, challenging many common-sense assumptions about what is involved in student writing and foregrounding the limitations in much current writing pedagogy", it has yet to be developed "as a design frame", and so far there has been very little "application of research findings and understandings to pedagogy" (p.33).

Lillis (2006) suggests that the pedagogical outcome of Academic Literacies is likely to be dialogues between student-writers and tutor-readers which "enable participation in dominant academic literacy practices as well as provide opportunities for challenging aspects of such practices" (p.33). For an American audience, such a conclusion is unlikely to bring much surprise. Dialogue around writing has long been a key element in writing classes and, more explicitly, in the work that goes on in writing centres and in the peer tutoring that forms an important part of writing fellows schemes.^[11] And this dialogue has often been advocated

precisely because of its ability to challenge dominant models and encourage students to explore issues relating to their own identity with greater confidence.[12]

Talk around and about writing needs to be an important aspect of any British response to student writing. But what form will that talk take and who will conduct it? We need to make sure that those responsible for the limited talk around writing which currently exists in UK higher education do not assume that their talk must be the best or only talk available to students.

Who Should Talk about Writing in the UK?

Writing support in UK higher education is provided largely by learning development or study support lecturers, with additional provision also offered on some campuses by the professional writers working for the Royal Literary Fund. Members of both of these communities of practitioners have recently stated their claim to being the best people to take on the job of talking about writing with the nation's students. However, the possible role of peer tutors and writing fellows has rarely been examined. And in the one article where it has been seriously considered (Devet, Orr, Blythman & Bishop, 2006), the verdict has been one of scepticism.

This article begins with an account by an American writing centre director of the many benefits of using peer tutors which US writing professionals have found during their long experience of dealing with these issues (Devet, Orr, Blythman & Bishop, 2006, pp.197-204). British study support practitioners and academics then follow this very positive account with a rather negative piece, expressing caution and doubts about using students to help other students in the UK context. There is scepticism about whether undergraduates are suited to take on this responsibility. For instance, peer tutors are said to lack the "life experience" that most Study Support lecturers are said to consider as one of their major strengths (p. 209). There is also a concern that student peer tutors might see themselves as "better" than the students they are meant to be helping (p. 211). These appear to be strange objections as there is no reason to think that students should lack life experience or see themselves as better than others any more than study support lecturers.

On the one hand, then, the authors of the article suggest that peer tutors may be unsuitable for the job. On the other hand, they make the case that study support lecturers possess the same ability to use non-directive pedagogies as peer tutors and also the same ability to forge collaborative relationships with students (Devet et al., 2006, p.209-10). This is not to be doubted, although the authors underplay the real advantages of the student-student relationship. Moreover, the fact that a Study Support Lecturer can offer a tutorial after the manner of non-directive, collaborative student-student tutorials does not, of course, mean that undergraduate peer mentors cannot do likewise.

The authors, in characteristically British fashion, also suggest that one should not assume that students automatically feel comfortable together and that "a working-class student might feel more 'equal' with a working-class academic than with a middle-class peer tutor" (p.210). Indeed, they express concern that the competitiveness of peer-tutor positions might mean that "middle-class monolingual" students will make up the majority of the peer tutors (p.210).

Overall, these objections to using peer tutoring to help student writers in a UK context seem very weak. No serious objection to peer tutoring is cited and the authors do not contest the many advantages outlined earlier in this article in the discussion of the American context. Indeed, the authors conclude by stating that they are not hostile to peer tutoring itself but rather argue "that there are dangers in attempting to replicate the US peer-tutoring model in an unreconstructed form" (p.211). This is certainly the case, and at London Met we have introduced peer mentoring in writing as an addition to existing learning development provision. What works in the American context must not be applied unthinkingly to the UK context, and indeed it cannot be so applied as UK universities currently lack the resources and expertise to do so. But

equally it should not be assumed that what works in the American context might not be effective and have an important part to play in British attempts to improve student writing.

The Royal Literary Fund Fellows seem to share this lack of confidence in making use of undergraduate peer tutors. The *Writing Matters* (2006) report is a call for action, communicating "grave concerns about shortcomings in student writing skills, and offer[ing] a wide range of creative suggestions and recommendations for ways forward" (Davies et al., 2006, p. vii). Among these suggestions, very little attention is given to the possibility of making use of students to help other students, even though this is an established part of the writing provision in other parts of the world. For example, in the report Angier and Palmer (2006) discuss the possible role of "Writing Development Centres" in UK Higher Education. The Fellows do suggest that students could have some role in staffing these centres, but it is clear that they think that any such role should be very limited: "And students themselves could be involved in passing on what they are learning, as part of a peer review or student mentor element built into the writing courses" (2006, p. 23). Elsewhere in the report, Husain and Waterfield (2006) acknowledge a role for student mentors. But again the role is restricted, it is detached from the main writing provision, and the mentors are unpaid:

Volunteer student mentors could be enlisted to provide further support for first-year undergraduates, either as part of the Student Union's expanding list of student support functions or by being attached to particular departments. A rigorous selection procedure, based on our proposed Diagnostic Entry Test, would ensure a sound grasp of writing skills in mentors and could be supplemented with training tailor-made for the purpose. Such systems have a proven track record at the University of Sussex and St Mary's University College, Belfast. (Husain & Waterfield, p.33)

The authors of the report (themselves professional writers working for the Royal Literary Fund) argue that they themselves are the ideal people to take on the responsibility to solve the crisis:

Writers themselves, however, are the best teachers of writing. Basic writing skills, as we have argued, are common to all genres, which is why the poets, playwrights, biographers and novelists of the RLF have universally found that they can help students. Best of all, practicing writers can help to put back into the experience of writing its most important elements, which many students have lost in their anxiety and confusion: pleasure, passion and the confidence not just to repeat ideas, but genuinely to explore them. (Angier & Palmer, 2006, p. 23)

As we will see in the next section, it is by no means quite as clear as the RLF Fellows seem to think that literary writing skills are applicable to all genres of writing, especially disciplinary writing. And it should also be obvious that professional or practising writers with two published books are not the only people capable of generating enthusiasm for writing.^[13] Student writers who love writing (whether literary writing or academic writing or both) are likely to apply for the positions of writing mentors, and they are naturally keen to communicate their enthusiasm to their fellow students. At the same time, unlike most professional writers, they also have direct contact with a student's discipline and its conventions and requirements.

Rather than simply assuming that each of us offers students the best talk about writing, writing practitioners need to establish what kinds of talk are needed and who are the best people to offer this talk. We do not need to assume that different models of writing support are exclusive. It may well be the case that an ideal system would be made up of a combination of undergraduate peer tutors, learning development lecturers and professional writers in residence, all working together to offer the best possible support for a variety of student needs.

Disciplinary Degrees and the Role of Writing Fellows

Fundamental to the nature of UK Higher Education is its disciplinary nature. Students are expected to write as historians, psychologists or social scientists right from the start of their education. Traditionally, students were expected to have understood the essentials of disciplinary academic writing in secondary school, during the two years in which they studied their subject for "A Level". However, the rise of mass higher education and the increasing popularity of degree subjects not taught at school have rendered this assumption problematic and unrealistic. American universities, with their four-year degrees, have more flexibility, with students able to acquire a range of skills, including academic writing in stand-alone writing classes, before focusing on a major subject. The three-year English disciplinary degree does not allow time for anything like this and UK universities lack the resources to offer such courses to their students.

The disciplinary nature of UK higher education suggests that any solution to the problem of student writing must be sought within the disciplines. However, much of the writing provision that currently exists takes the form of stand-alone and optional study skills provision, where writing is treated as a skill that is detached from the students' discipline. This approach has recently been criticised by Ursula Wingate (2006), who argues that generic lecture series and workshops on writing do not really meet the complexities of the writing which students are asked to carry out. Instead, she calls for a move from a "bolt-on" study-skills approach to a "built-in embedded approach where learning is developed through the subject teaching" (p. 457).^[14] This is in accord with Academic Literacies thinking, which argues that the problems that both students and lecturers have with writing are often a result not so much of surface features of writing as of confusions concerning issues of epistemology and disciplinarity (Lea & Street, 1998). Given this, it would seem that we should be able to learn much from Writing-in-the-Disciplines approaches in which writing is emphasised and taught as an integrated part of the academic course.^[15] The UK is in a position to adapt the most effective practice in this area to its own context, and some initial steps have been taken in this direction, not least the *Thinking Writing* initiative headed by Sally Mitchell at Queen Mary College, University of London.^[16]

According to Wingate (2006), real understanding of the complexities of disciplinary writing "can only be achieved within the subject and through explanations, modelling and feedback by subject tutors" (p. 463). Course instructors clearly have a responsibility, and Wingate is correct to point out that they can effect change in this area without unduly adding to their workload (p. 464). But students who are themselves engaged with coming to terms with the complexities of their disciplinary discourse may also have a role to play in helping other students. Writing fellows offer students support from someone who has mastered or is in the process of mastering the demands and conventions of the same discipline and who are close enough to their peers to recognise the confusions that they are going through, confusions which may not be so apparent to a lecturer who has thoroughly internalised the epistemology of his discipline or to a learning development lecturer or RLF Fellow, who may be altogether outside of the discipline.

While some staff might be willing to adapt their courses to facilitate better understanding of the epistemological practices of the discipline, they are often reluctant or unable to provide the kind of individual help and "talk" which students also need, help which may be seen by some staff as time-consuming or even as beneath them. However, some of this instruction can be taken by second- or third-year students, who are in general extremely delighted to be able to help beginning students figure out some of the disciplinary peculiarities which they have recently worked through themselves. It would seem, therefore, that writing fellows might be able to play a crucial role in encouraging academic staff to participate in Writing-in-the-Disciplines initiatives, removing some of the workload and making lecturers feel more comfortable with assuming responsibility for their students' writing.

Wingate (2006) outlines four areas where subject tutors should help students understand the complexities of the discipline and thereby help them become better disciplinary writers: addressing "epistemological assumptions"; demonstrating "how knowledge is constructed in the specific discipline"; making "it explicit

that students are not recipients of, but active contributors to knowledge"; and demonstrating "rhetorical processes in academic writing, for instance ways of integrating one's own voice with existing knowledge" (p. 464). Writing fellows are able to play an effective role in helping their fellow students understand all of these issues. For instance, here a London Metropolitan University psychology writing mentor reflects on a session in which epistemological assumptions were openly discussed with a student taking a combined degree in psychology and criminology:[17]

After we first met, Aminta mentioned that, although she felt very confident when writing for criminology, psychology was a completely new field of study for her and caused her to feel very out of her depth. I was keen to get her to elaborate on her feelings of competence and confidence in criminology, and attempted to translate this to her psychology studies. It seems that Aminta does a lot of general reading and thinking about criminology, and we discussed the possibility of her spending a bit more time engaged in "light" psychology reading (such as the BPS magazine and *Scientific American Mind*) to help her feel more at home with the discipline. I was slightly concerned that Aminta seemed ready to view me as some kind of expert with a huge gulf between us. I spent a lot of time stressing that the learning curve at university is steep, and that practice in reading and writing for psychology would very quickly help her feel more confident and knowledgeable. This appeared to be quite well received, and at the end of our session she mentioned that she was in the mood to spend the rest of the day in the library working on this assignment.

The mentor here helps a student entering a new discourse realise that disciplinary competence and confidence is possible and inspires her to do some work rather than worry about feeling out of her depth. Writing fellows are uniquely able to do this, since the expertise of a lecturer is often just as likely to intimidate students as to encourage them. It is surely easier for a beginning student to imagine that they might attain the level of competence of a writing fellow than of a lecturer.

Writing Fellows and London Metropolitan University

I want now to talk about the initial work of a small writing fellows scheme which is attempting to effect change at London Metropolitan University and to reflect on how this work relates to the more general discussion and theorising above. *Write Now* is a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).[18] It aims to offer innovative writing provision to help students to become confident disciplinary writers and to carry out research into the effectiveness of this provision. We hope that this research will help drive the effective dissemination of good practice across the higher education sector. At London Metropolitan University, the most visible *Write Now* activity has been the creation of a writing centre, the first at London Met and one of the very few such centres in the United Kingdom.[19] The London Met writing centre supplements rather than replaces existing writing provision (for example workshops, lecture courses and one-to-one tutorials offered by the Learning Development Unit). This gives us an opportunity to experiment with different kinds of writing support and to conduct research into our activities.

As a result, we have been able to put in place a writing centre where most of the teaching is carried out by undergraduate peer tutors. This is extremely unusual in the UK, where most of the teaching in learning development units and in the few writing centres which exist is usually carried out by academic staff.[20] Our writing centre aims to serve the whole of the enormous London Met university community while at the same time working with academic staff in a variety of disciplines. We were able to employ ten undergraduates to work eight hours each a week during the academic year, 2006-07. These undergraduates formed the core teaching staff in the writing centre but are also expected to work as writing fellows in their disciplines, involved in the writing centre's collaborations with various lecturers.[21]

Our initial collaborations were with lecturers in design, film studies and psychology, and we hired writing mentors from these subjects. These mentors were attached to the higher education orientation module in their discipline, an introductory first-year module which is compulsory for all first-year students and which is intended to introduce students to the skills needed to succeed at university. The nature of the actual collaborations and of the relationship between the writing mentor and the module varied, depending on the nature of the module and the lecturers' aims and expectations. All of these collaborations are now continuing into a second year.

Our experience so far is that academic staff are very keen on using writing mentors and their availability has been a great incentive in encouraging staff to participate in writing-related collaborations. We have not encountered any reluctance to using students to help other students nor have we encountered any objections from learning and development lecturers, with whom we work closely. It seems that in practice, when a system is in place, the potential objections to using peer tutors disappear. Staff understand the value of fellow students in helping other students to understand the wide range of academic literacies which are needed for success. This has been particularly the case with our collaboration with the first-year film studies higher education module. This module involved considerable joint-teaching between myself and the subject lecturer, with the aim of embedding academic literacies and study skills firmly within a disciplinary context. The lecturer was particularly keen to make use of the writing mentors and to work with them on the module. In our first year, our plan was for the students to discuss the essay question with a writing mentor at an early stage in the semester so that the mentor and students could discuss the essay topic and also make sure that the students were comfortable with the basic skills that they would need. There would then be a second meeting later in the semester when the students had written an essay plan. The lecturer met the writing fellows in advance in order to explain the assignment. These meetings were not part of the assessment for the course, but the lecturer nevertheless presented them as something that was required of all students.

However, we ran into a problem which I had rather naively or perhaps optimistically failed to anticipate. I had been very keen that these meetings be held in our writing centre. This was in part because I wanted students to visit our new centre and find out about us. However, London Met is divided into two campuses, one in north London (North Campus, where the Film Studies lectures are held) and one in the East End of London (City Campus, where the writing centre is based). It became quite clear that many students were not willing to travel across town for a tutorial. Only around a quarter of the students came in for a tutorial. This was disappointing, although it did teach us an important lesson: if we wanted writing fellows to be effective, then they really would have to go out to the students. They would need to be more firmly integrated within the course and the students' regular study experience.

As a result, we changed our strategy and for the second planned meeting the mentors in film studies came to North Campus and attended a seminar in which the students were revising their essay plans. During this session, we arranged for the students to talk to the mentors on a one-to-one basis. However, because of time restrictions they were only able to meet for around 10 or 15 minutes, considerably less than the one hour which they would normally receive in a writing centre tutorial. But because of the focused nature of the assignment, the mentors were able to offer help and make sure the students were in general on track. This experience also made it clear to us that we would need a writing centre presence on North Campus and we opened a satellite operation there in the spring semester.

We are continuing our collaboration with film studies this year. Central to our approach this year is sending the mentors to the seminars in their capacity as writing fellows. And also we are hopeful that the presence of the writing centre at the North Campus will facilitate writing tutorials for students. These additional writing centre tutorials outside of regular class time are a necessity in our plans, not least because of the limited teaching time in the UK university semester. Nevertheless, we hope that our presence in the course means that we will reach all students to some degree and also to enable them to understand the extra writing support that is available. And, as we have seen, the Fellows have also encouraged a collaboration with an enthused staff member, which has led to changes in the curriculum and more thought about the writing

process, teaching writing, effective feedback and the introduction of weekly non-assessed reflective writing assignments.

One interesting result of our first-year experience with film studies was the realisation that it was often the stronger students who made the most of our collaboration. These students seemed to welcome the possibilities of taking writing seriously, of articulating and defending their own position and having someone to respond carefully to and talk over their ideas. This is not always how student writing is conceived in the UK, where essays are often more rambling, less expository and less argument-driven (or thesis-driven) than the typical US college essay. The Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing in the Disciplines movements in the US were not motivated simply by a desire to help weaker students, but they arose out of a recognition of the importance of writing in improving the learning and thinking of *all* students (see e.g. Bean 2001, p.15-52). This is an important lesson for us to remember in the UK, where the debate around writing, especially the public debate, is so dominated by anxieties around "remedial" students. For real change to be made in the UK, we will need to show that attention to writing helps the learning experience of *all* students and that we are not simply asking lecturers to deal with the "problem" of weak writers, who some academic staff would doubtless prefer not to have to teach. We need to persuade our institutions that Writing in the Disciplines raises standards for all students.

Our approach with other subjects has varied depending on the interests and requirements of the lecturer. One challenge we face is the limited amount of teaching time and the pressures on academic staff to use the time available for coverage of disciplinary material. At London Met, there are only 11 weeks of teaching each semester, with students usually attending one lecture and one seminar a week, although this varies depending on the course. This is considerably less classroom time than students in most US university courses might expect to receive, and as a result there is less time for in-class writing work. This means that some of the writing mentors' work will inevitably take place outside class time in the writing centre. For example, for our collaboration with the large psychology higher education orientation module, the writing centre offered optional workshops closely related to the actual writing assignments that students were working on: reflective statements and personal statements. Writing mentors in psychology were attached to these workshops and also offered follow-up writing tutorials in which almost all the students who attended the workshops participated. However, we reached only around 35 of the 140 or so students in this way, although feedback suggests that they benefited from the experience. I also lectured on writing to the whole class, but there was no opportunity to bring the writing mentors into the module to reach all the students. We will try to figure out a solution to this problem, but this year we are repeating last year's approach, as the lecturer is content with this level of cooperation.

In addition to developing our initial collaborations, we plan to add new disciplines every year so that we gradually reach more and more departments of the university. We have already held one well-attended conference showcasing our work with academic staff, and the University's Centre for Academic and Professional Development would like this to become an annual event. Writing mentors, then, have proved to be an excellent way of allowing the work of the writing centre to reach the academic departments and to begin the work of helping discipline-based lecturers to introduce effective writing pedagogy into their courses while at the same time offering staff and students as much support as possible.

At the same time, these writing fellows work in the writing centre as writing mentors, where they have been trained to offer non-directive writing tutorials to the entire university community, carrying out most of the 750 or so one-hour one-to-one tutorials which we have held in our first year of operation.^[22] It should be noted that all of these tutorials have been voluntary in nature. Given the disciplinary nature of the British Higher Education system, a flexible writing fellows / writing mentors approach seems an effective way of operating a writing centre while at the same time reaching out to academic staff in the disciplines.

Conclusion

In this article, I hope to have shown that a writing fellows scheme is uniquely able to help students with the pressures that they face as they plunge into the demands of UK disciplinary degree writing, while at the same time helping to facilitate and encourage writing initiatives among academic staff. This is particularly important in a context where such initiatives remain rare and where staff are keen to guard their time for research and are often wary of making commitments which will prove to be extra work. At the same time, the writing fellows have also been able to work as writing mentors and so have allowed us to operate a full-scale writing centre which is open to the whole university.

The writing mentors have helped us to promote writing across the university in other ways. Staff are keen to make use of the writing mentors in their own classes, even if they are in a different discipline, and this has helped us make further inroads into the various university departments and to raise the consciousness of staff concerning student writing and their potential role in improving it. We have managed to make progress towards developing a culture where students want to talk about their work without any implications that they are remedial writers. Our mentors do not think of their students in this way at all, and this has made our writing centre a very positive rather than despairing or depressing place. We do not have to try to avoid associations with deficiencies in writing. We simply ignore these associations as irrelevant, treating all our students in the same way, working with them wherever they happen to be on their writing journey without feeling the need to be shocked by their writing skills.

So instead of shock and outrage, instead of cynicism and apathy, and instead of depression and despair, we have undergraduate writing mentors who are enthusiastic about the work they do. And students seem to be responding to this positive approach. Writing fellows and writing mentors may not be the only approach to expanding disciplinary writing instruction in British universities, but I am convinced that they ought to be an important part of our curricular and pedagogical innovation. Indeed, they offer so many benefits to students that it becomes tempting to see the "problem" of student writing as an opportunity to make improvements in an educational system that has resisted real pedagogical change for too long. In the next few years, London Metropolitan University, along with colleagues at Aston University, Liverpool Hope University and St Mary's University College Belfast, will carry out research to determine the effectiveness of writing mentors and writing fellows in a UK context. In the meantime, we hope that debate concerning their use will not be prematurely foreclosed.

References

- Angier, Carole, & Palmer, William. (2006). Writing solutions. In Stevie Davies, David Swinburne, & Gweno Williams (Eds.) *Writing matters: The Royal Literary Fund report on student writing in higher education* (pp.15-25). London: The Royal Literary Fund.
- Bad language (2006, March 25). *The Guardian*. Retrieved 5-29-2007, from <http://books.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1739110.00.html>
- Bawarshi, Anis, & Pelkowski, Stephanie. (2003). Postcolonialism and the idea of a writing center. In Christina Murphy & Steve Sherwood (Eds.), *The St. Martin's sourcebook for writing tutors* (pp. 80-95). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Bean, John C. (2001). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. (1984). Collaborative learning and the 'conversation of mankind'. *College English* 46, 635-52.
- Cooper, Marilyn M. (1984). Really useful knowledge: A cultural studies agenda for writing centers. In Christina Murphy & Steve Sherwood (Eds.), *The St. Martin's sourcebook for writing tutors* (pp. 53-67). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Davies, Stevie, Swinburne, David, & Williams, Gweno. (Eds.). (2006). *Writing matters: The Royal Literary Fund report on student writing in higher education*. London: The Royal Literary Fund.

- Devet, Bonnie, Orr, Susan, Blythman, Margo, & Bishop, Celia. (2006). Peering across the pond: The role of students in developing other students' writing in the US and UK. In Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education* (pp. 196-211). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Falchikov, Nancy. (2001). *Learning together: Peer tutoring in higher education*. London: Routledge.
- The future of higher education (2003). Department for Education and Skills White Paper. Retrieved 5-29-07, from <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/pdfs/DfES-HigherEducation.pdf>
- Ganobcsik-Williams, Lisa. (Ed.). (2006). *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education* (pp. 6-15). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Greats handbook (2007). Retrieved 5-29-2007 from http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/handbooks/Greats_Handbook_2007.pdf
- Hensher, Philip. (2006, March 23). The awful truth about our universities. *The Independent*. Retrieved 5-29-2007, from http://comment.independent.co.uk/columnists_a_l/philip_hensher/article352954.ece
- Husain, Shahrukh, & Waterfield, Robin. (2006). The first year of higher education. In Stevie Davies, David Swinburne, & Gweno Williams. (Eds.) *Writing matters: The Royal Literary Fund report on student writing in higher education* (pp.27-33). London: The Royal Literary Fund.
- Ivanič, Ros, & Lea, Mary R. (2006). New contexts, new challenges: The teaching of writing in UK higher education. In Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education* (pp. 6-15). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lea, Mary R. & Street, Brian V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23, 157-72.
- Lillis, Theresa M. (2006). Moving towards an "academic literacies" pedagogy: Dialogues of participation. In Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education* (pp. 30-45). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McLeod, Susan, & Maimon, Elaine. (2000). Clearing the air: WAC myths and realities. *College English* 62, 573-83.
- Monroe, Jonathan. (Ed.). (2003). *Local knowledges, local practices: Writing in the disciplines at Cornell*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh.
- Murray, Nicholas & Kirton, Bill. (2006). An analysis of the current situation. In Stevie Davies, David Swinburne, & Gweno Williams (Eds.), *Writing matters: The Royal Literary Fund report on student writing in higher education* (pp.7-13). London: The Royal Literary Fund.
- Newman, Melanie. (2007, March 16). "Appalling" writing skills drive tutors to seek help. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 6.
- Warren, Digby. (2002). Curriculum design in a context of widening participation in higher education. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 1, 85-99.
- Warren, Digby. (2003). A discipline-based approach to developing academic literacy: A case-study of a first-year history module. In David Gosling & Vaneeta D'Andrea (Eds.), *International conference on the scholarship of teaching and learning: Proceedings 2001-2002* (pp.109-117). London: Educational Development Centre, City University.
- Wingate, Ursula. (2006). Doing away with "study skills." *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11, 457-69.
- Woolbright, Meg. (2003). The politics of tutoring: Feminism within the patriarchy. In Christina Murphy & Steve Sherwood (Eds.), *The St. Martin's sourcebook for writing tutors* (pp. 67-80). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Notes

[1] The writing of this essay has been supported by the collaborative Write Now Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning funded by HEFCE at London Metropolitan University, Liverpool Hope University and Aston University (www.writenow.ac.uk). I am particularly grateful to my London Met colleagues Katherine Harrington and Katerina Koutsantoni for their feedback and advice.

[2] Note that academic staff are increasingly aware of the more general "peer-assisted learning schemes," which have a presence on many campuses. See Falchikov, 2001.

[3] Note also p. vii on a "sense of shock at a perceived deficit on the part of students in the skills necessary to write successfully at university level." The language of deficit here seems to be in tension with the more constructive calls by the Fellows for writing centres which offer developmental rather than remedial services (e.g. Angier and Palmer, 2006, p.21).

[4] The lack of learning by heart is also mentioned in the introduction to the volume (p. xiv).

[5] Note the remarkable (and already out-of-date) claims at p. xiii: "What is the effect on the mind of the modern world of communication? Although it's still too early to say, one thing seems certain. If you spend much of your day listening to CDs, texting friends, speaking on your mobile, watching DVDs or surfing the internet, then you are not reading in the traditional manner. You are not reading as Coleridge or F.R. Leavis or Erich Auerbach understood it. You are acquiring information, often fragmentary and uncorrected, often at great speed. You have the technological facility to cover vast areas swiftly. The internet has radically changed our ability to acquire information, but what has it done to our powers of concentration? To access and download internet content is not to learn."

[6] See, for example, the articles in the Independent and Guardian newspapers (Hensher, 2006 and "Bad Language," 2006). Note that in the RLF report, Murray and Kirton (2006, p.10) themselves point out the "sterility" of the decline thesis and the need for "new thinking."

[7] Note, for example, the advice on writing essays in the current student handbook for the Oxford "Greats" course: "Your essay should be literate and well presented, with a firm structure and suitably paragraphed. This means a certain amount of advanced planning. You should be drawing on the items on the reading list, but not just regurgitating them. If you quote, whether from ancient or modern sources, give the proper reference (including if appropriate a bibliography at the end). You should not despise valuable tools such as a dictionary or Roget's *Thesaurus*. Punchy or stylish writing is welcome, but do not make high-flown rhetoric a substitute for serious argument" (Greats Handbook, 2007, p. 5). The tone remains gentlemanly and the content is so vague as to be almost useless. Nevertheless, it is a sign of the times that such advice is now included at all.

[8] For discussion of the changing context of writing in UK universities, see Ivanič & Lea, 2006, pp. 6-9.

[9] Note that practitioners in English for Academic Purposes help prepare students for higher education. However, their work usually impacts international or non-traditional students who are about to begin university study rather than the student body as a whole.

[10] See, for example, the recent article in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* in which psychology lecturers lament the "appallingly bad" written English of many of their students and call for evidence-based solutions (Newman, 2007).

[11] See Bruffee for a classic statement of the value of conversation about writing and the importance of good thought in generating good writing (1984, e.g. p. 642).

[12] See e.g. Bawarshi and Pelkowski, 2003; Cooper, 2003; and Woolbright, 2003.

[13] According to the RLF website, eligibility for teaching on the Fellowship programme is restricted to "professional, published writers of literary merit with at least two (sole-authored) books - of any genre - already published (or mainstream theatre works performed or scripts broadcast)."

[14] Wingate builds heavily on the work of Lea and Street, 1998. See also Warren 2002, examining the South African and Australian context but reaching similar conclusions.

[15] For an account of some of the Writing-in-the-Disciplines approaches at Cornell University, see Monroe 2003.

[16] For details, see the project website: www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk. See also Warren 2003, examining how "academic literacy" was developed in a History module in a UK university and arguing that developing students' "epistemic cognition" can enhance their reading and writing in the discipline.

[17] Of course, issues of disciplinarity can be particularly confusing to the increasing number of students who, because of the popularity of combined degrees and the rise of modularity, are expected to write in more than one discipline or who have prior experience in another discipline.

[18] See www.writenow.ac.uk.

[19] See Angier and Palmer 2006 for an account of existing writing provision in the UK.

[20] The main exception is St Mary's University College in Belfast, which does have a successful writing centre staffed by peer tutors. Matthew Martin and Jonathan Worley, who are responsible for this writing centre, led the initial writing mentor training at London Met in September 2006.

[21] Note that we use the term "writing mentor" to refer to the work that the students carry out as peer tutors in the writing centre and as writing fellows attached to particular modules.

[22] We also employ a postgraduate writing mentor to work with postgraduate students.

Contact Information

Peter O'Neill
London Metropolitan University Writing Centre
Calcutta House, CMB-22
Old Castle Street
London E1 7NT
Email: peter.oneill@londonmet.ac.uk

Complete APA Citation

O'Neill, Peter. (2008, March 29). Using peer writing fellows in British universities: Complexities and possibilities [Special issue on Writing Fellows]. *Across the Disciplines*, 5. Retrieved from <https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/fellows/oneill.pdf>