

Developing Core Principles for Tutor Education

Lisa Cahill, Molly Rentscher, Jessica Jones, Darby Simpson, and Kelly Chase
Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona



In 2015, our team of writing center administrators from five campuses at Arizona State University realized that some of our ongoing tutor education practices

needed to be revised to prompt our peer writing tutors to think more critically and personally about writing center principles and practices. Thus, we resolved to make significant and lasting improvements to the ways we educate our tutors. Specifically, we wanted our tutors to think more reflectively and critically about their daily practices and to be able to identify the strategies and mindsets they used to engage students in conversations about writing.

Our team undertook the process of revising our ongoing tutor education practices, including initial training sessions, bi-weekly education meetings, and tutor observations and evaluations. In doing so, we discovered that grounding our practices in principles derived from carefully selected scholarship was a successful approach, both for meeting our goals and for professionally developing our peer writing tutors. Based on our positive experience, we argue for the value of engaging in a process to develop a set of core principles and embedding these principles into tutor evaluation and ongoing education. This article provides an account of the process we used to develop our materials in addition to descriptions that illustrate our core principles.

OUR CORE PRINCIPLES

Our core principles consist of a set of habits of mind and a corresponding set of beliefs about the philosophy and practice of writing center work. Our team developed the habits of mind from those described in *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a document written by representatives from The Council

of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. We slightly revised the habits to enable us to describe for our tutors the qualities, mindsets, and behaviors we expect them to demonstrate in their work. Complementing our habits of mind are our beliefs, adapted from Muriel Harris's "The Concept of a Writing Center." Our beliefs refer to the foundational pedagogical guidelines that inform our writing center practices. In other words, the habits of mind refer to the qualities and behaviors we desire of our tutors, whereas beliefs refer to the philosophical concepts central to Writing Center Studies. Together, our habits of mind and beliefs guide our programmatic decisions and engage tutors in ongoing education. Descriptions of how we developed our habits of mind and integrated them into tutor education as well as examples of how tutors engaged with our beliefs are detailed below.

OUR HABITS OF MIND

Our first step in improving our tutor education was finding a way to make more visible, quantifiable, and transparent the qualities and behaviors we expect tutors to demonstrate in their work. We chose the *Framework* because it identifies eight habits of mind expected of successful writers. We were drawn to the *Framework's* descriptions of "ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students' success in a variety of fields and disciplines" (1) because our writing tutors' primary responsibility is engaging students in conversations about writing projects and processes. We believed that drawing from the *Framework's* habits of mind could help our tutors better understand the nuances of the demands faced by college-level writers. Furthermore, we wanted these habits to provide our tutors with language for thinking more critically about their work performance in terms of the questions they use to engage writers, the types of resources they share, and the suggestions they offer.

As a result, we reviewed the habits of mind and made revisions appropriate for the context of peer writing tutoring. Our revisions included changing the names of some habits while keeping others and rewriting the descriptions to better fit our context. For example, the *Framework* describes flexibility as "the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands" (1); however, we rewrote that description to reflect the importance of tutors adapting to changes in procedures and policies. We re-named the *Framework's* habit "curiosity" as "inquisitiveness" to encourage tutors to be more intentional about contributing to their

campus writing center community. Recasting the *Framework's* habit "engagement" as "leadership" allowed us to highlight the contributions that tutors can make through the writing center. These descriptions included multiple bullet points for each habit that outlined the behaviors we wanted to see our tutors demonstrate.

Below we provide an abridged description for each habit that includes only one behavior per habit to illustrate the expectations that guide our tutors' work. For instance, we offer the leadership behavior of helping, which is the key to the leadership habit; however, we share many other leadership behaviors with our tutors: building rapport with colleagues and students, understanding the center's mission and articulating its application to their tutoring, taking a lead role in group projects within the center, and suggesting new projects for the benefit of the center. Thus, the behaviors shown below do not include all the behaviors we outline for our tutors but instead illustrate those we feel best represents each habit.

Inquisitiveness: Demonstrating an interest in the underlying philosophy, pedagogy, and theory of writing center work by seeking out research and reflecting on experiences in the center

Persistent Engagement: Investing time to develop current and new skills in order to better perform job duties

Leadership: Helping other students and staff within the center achieve common goals, complete tasks, or understand content

Responsibility: Adhering to all Writing Center policies and philosophies

Openness: Contributing positively to the creation of a safe, positive learning environment for students and staff

Flexibility: Troubleshooting situations with or without the aid of peers and supervisor

Creativity: Attempting new strategies or ways of tutoring by adapting to the students with whom tutors work

Reflexivity: Seeking opportunities to debrief with supervisor or colleagues with the purpose of improving self and services

After finalizing our habits of mind, we then integrated the information into tutor evaluation and education practices to provide tutors with multiple opportunities to assess their development. Our goal was to help tutors identify and apply these habits to their work, find examples from their tutoring sessions to discuss with their supervisors and peers, and articulate the

value of demonstrating these habits in their academic, personal, and professional lives. For example, during initial tutor education workshops, tutors are introduced to the habits through reflective writing and group activities that ask them to describe their own beliefs and philosophies about writing tutoring. Using that information, they brainstorm tutoring strategies to illustrate each habit of mind. Likewise, habits identified by tutors or by our team as needing attention serve as the basis for ongoing tutor education workshops. For instance, a workshop based on persistent engagement includes discussions and activities focused on helping tutors be more intentional about role modeling when and how to use resources in sessions as a way of fostering students' independence. Additionally, tutors use the habits in their self-evaluations and peer evaluations to reflect on their performance throughout the year. Our evaluation forms ask tutors to provide examples of the habits they identify as their strengths as well as areas in which they need to develop. During evaluation meetings, our team found that tutors were able to identify patterns in their work related to the habits and could then make action plans for continued growth. In particular, some tutors noted that the habit of openness helped them to identify the expectation that they should adapt their communication styles to be more responsive to individual students' needs.

We found that implementing the habits of mind into our tutor evaluation and education practices provided opportunities for more meaningful tutor reflections and conversations. Seeing our tutors engage with and personalize our habits of mind prompted us to find new ways to connect tutors' work to writing center philosophies. Taking this next step would ultimately help us more closely connect our tutors to the beliefs guiding our administrative and pedagogical decisions. Therefore, the following academic year, we created a set of writing center beliefs to complement our writing center habits of mind.

OUR BELIEFS

To form our beliefs, we reviewed scholarship about core principles in writing and writing center work and noticed that several of these texts (discussed below) were recently published. This told us that developing core principles for writing center programs was an innovative, timely pursuit and inspired us to distill beliefs from our readings and experiences. These texts included volumes used for tutor education, such as Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli's *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and Lauren Fitzgerald and Melissa Iannetta's *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, which both acknowledge an increasingly diverse landscape of writing

centers in the United States and thus discuss a range of guiding principles for writing tutors. Further, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's influential collection of essays about writing, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, uses the term threshold concepts to identify and describe concepts "critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice" (2). Rebecca Nowacek and Bradley Hughes's article, published in the Adler-Kassner and Wardle collection, provides a rationale for how foundational concepts "cannot only help writing center coordinators articulate (and therefore clarify and sometimes revise) priorities for the structure of tutor education programs, [but they] can also help tutors themselves conceptualize their own work with writers and with faculty" (171). Nowacek and Hughes conclude by inviting readers to identify and define additional core principles related to writing centers. Our review of this scholarship inspired our team to establish a set of beliefs to guide our writing center work.

When developing our beliefs, we wanted to draw from principles considered central to the writing center field. Harris's principles in "The Concept of a Writing Center" are certainly foundational as evidenced by the International Writing Centers Association's recommendation that readers consult them when looking for information about starting a writing center. We also wanted our beliefs to engage tutors in conversations about the transferability of skills developed through peer tutoring. Harris's statement suited our purposes well, given her inclusive language and connections between writing centers and other contexts. However, to better reflect our cross-campus writing center program, we revised some of Harris's language and also incorporated our writing center mission statement. For example, our belief listed below that "peer-to-peer collaboration is an effective learning method" is inspired by Harris's principle that "tutorials are offered in a one-to-one setting." We slightly shifted the language from "one-to-one tutorial" to "peer-to-peer collaboration" to highlight that our tutors should study how to collaborate with peers. In developing our other beliefs, we used a similar process of shifting the language to reflect our program's complete set of writing center beliefs listed below:

- Peer-to-peer collaboration is an effective learning method.
- We help at any stage of the writing process.
- We collaborate with writers at all levels of writing proficiency.
- We are coaches and collaborators.
- We help writers identify and understand how writing varies by audience, context, and genre.

- Each writer’s individual needs are the focus of the tutoring session.
- We experiment and practice.
- We engage in professional development and utilize resources.

We hoped that developing and then sharing our beliefs with tutors would encourage them to think more critically about their daily practice, and we have been impressed with tutors’ engagement in ongoing education sessions and evaluation meetings. For example, in her observation of another tutor, one tutor wrote: “When her students are stuck on something . . . she offers a plethora of options a student might employ to get them thinking and often couples this with an explanation of which option might be the most effective given the particular rhetorical situation.” This tutor has not only learned our belief that “we help writers identify and understand how writing varies by audience, context, and genre,” but she was also able to identify this belief in action and provide evidence about how her fellow tutor’s practices illustrated this belief.

Our beliefs had another desirable, albeit unexpected, outcome: they helped guide tutors through unfamiliar or challenging tutoring situations. Tutors have often told us that when they were unsure what to say in tutoring sessions, they thought of a belief, and this helped them decide how to proceed. In an evaluation meeting, for example, one tutor shared the story of a student who left the tutoring session several times to receive phone calls, which prevented them from addressing the multiple tasks on their agenda. The tutor reminded herself that “each writer’s individual needs are the focus of the tutorial,” so she decided to explicitly ask the student about his needs. The student shared that he needed to end the session early, so the tutor helped him revise the session agenda so they could focus on the most important task before the session ended. Thus, beliefs can provide boundaries within which tutors learn how to react to challenging tutoring situations.

Finally, we credit the creation and implementation of our beliefs with providing a shared language to talk about writing and writing tutoring and for engaging tutors in conversations about transferability. After integrating these beliefs into our daily work, we have observed some noticeable changes. Tutors in our centers now use phrases like “peer-to-peer learning” and “student-centered pedagogy” and words like “audience” and “coach” with ease. And when our tutors read writing center scholarship or attend conferences, they continue to see these words and phrases; thus, this language extends beyond our centers,

connecting our tutors to the larger writing center community. This language also helps our tutors better understand the value of their work beyond writing centers, since many of our beliefs are desired in other academic, professional, and personal contexts. For instance, our tutors have explained that in interviews with potential employers, they have discussed how writing varies across contexts and how this knowledge could help them in a new position. Equally important, tutors tell us that our beliefs have provided language to talk about writing processes when coaching family and friends on drafts. Overall, we found that our beliefs helped tutors conceptualize their work with writers and other collaborators.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many benefits to developing and integrating a set of program-specific core principles. We set out to better articulate our expectations to our peer writing tutors and ended up furthering our understanding of writing center pedagogy and tutor education practices. In this way, we discovered that the creation of core principles can be an exploratory exercise for a program, functioning “as an exigence, an opportunity to uncover and interrogate assumptions” (Yancey xix). From a supervisory standpoint, the use of core principles not only held our tutors accountable but also gave them opportunities to more deeply understand the theories behind their role. Thus, we observed that our tutors reflected upon their work meaningfully and otherwise showed clear indications that they were developing in ways that would last beyond their tenure as writing tutors.

In sharing our process and reflecting on core principles, our goal is not to propose a one-size-fits-all process; rather, we argue that there is value in undertaking the development of a set of core principles which meets the unique needs and goals of a writing center. For centers that might want to begin or continue a similar process, we offer considerations for identifying and eventually integrating a set of program-specific core principles. To begin the process of creating these principles, administrators can connect a theory or key piece of scholarship that is compatible with the values that already exist within their writing center. Next, administrators can adapt the theory or scholarship by finding language or examples from their selected writing center literature to write a personalized set of core principles. The final step is to integrate their principles into their program. To do so we recommend administrators start by reviewing existing documents like mission statements, evaluation forms, tutor

education materials, and website text to identify places where language needs to stay the same or change in order to reflect their center's core principles. By embedding core principles into multiple materials, administrators will find new ways to inform their centers' education practices by uncovering implicitly held beliefs and values, putting those beliefs and values into explicit language, sharing that information with others, and creating or revising new items. Once core principles have been incorporated, administrators will be able to assess the effectiveness of their tutor education practices and share those results with stakeholders within and outside the institution. The process of developing and integrating a set of program-specific core principles is an investment that can help administrators make significant and lasting improvements to their tutor education programs. It will challenge administrators to be more explicit about their goals for tutor education and will provide them with a framework for program assessment while simultaneously challenging tutors to develop and demonstrate the skills, mindsets, and behaviors valuable in their writing center work and other contexts.



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