

Building Knowledge across Institutional Roles: When Peer and Professional Tutors Work Side-by-Side

Maggie M. Herb

SUNY Buffalo State University

For the last seven years, I have directed a writing center that employs equal numbers of peer tutors and professional tutors. These peer tutors consist of both undergraduate and graduate students, while the professional tutors are part-time employees who are not students or faculty at the institution, and whose primary role at the institution is that of writing tutor.¹

I am not alone in using this mixed-staffing model. According to the 2020-21 Writing Center Research Project (WCRP), 38% of those surveyed indicated that their writing center employs at least some professional staff.²

Early in my tenure at SUNY Buffalo State University, our writing center was temporarily relocated from a cluster of connected cubicles to one single room while we waited for a building-wide renovation to be completed. An unexpected benefit of this move was that peer and professional tutors were now working in closer proximity, and as I observed the everyday interactions between these tutors—often decades apart in age and with different kinds of work and life experiences—I became particularly curious about how their relationships with each other shaped their work. Upon starting my investigation, I was surprised by how little scholarship examined the dynamics of peer and professional tutors working together. Despite the significant number of writing centers that employ professional tutors, scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on peer tutors, with Rebecca Babcock and Therese Thonus suggesting that “undergraduate...tutors have and will always be the most researched topic in writing center scholarship” (99).

The limited scholarship that does investigate professional tutors tends to focus exclusively on their concerns, such as Elizabeth Chilbert’s exploration of how her professional identity shifted as she moved between the writing center and the classroom or Alison Bright’s study of a training program for professional tutors. The scholarship that considers both professional tutors and peer tutors most often compares or contrasts them, rather than examining the relationships between them. For example, James H. Bell’s study compared the performance of professional tutors to peer tutors, tracking the kinds of suggestions each made and the students’ subsequent revisions, ultimately concluding that students who worked with professional tutors were more likely to make significant revisions to their work. Similarly, Steven Strang argues that professional tutors bring more professionalism and credibility to the reputation of a writing center and posits that “much more can be accomplished” (293) with a professional tutor staff than a peer tutor staff. Megan Swihart Jewell and Joseph Cheatle’s edited collection, *Redefining Roles: The Professional, Faculty, and Graduate Consultant’s Guide to Writing Centers*, is a notable exception to the scholarship that considers professional and peer tutors in isolation or in contrast. Rather, in this



collection, several contributors—most notably Catherine Siemann and Arundhati Sanyal and Kelly A. Shea—delve into peer and professional tutor interactions, with Siemann describing positive mentoring relationships between the two groups and Sanyal and Shea finding a lack of connection between peer and faculty tutors; however, the topic of peer and professional tutor relationships is not the primary focus of either chapter.

After noting this gap in the scholarship, I developed my study to explore how peer and professional tutors working together in a writing center with a mixed staffing model experience and understand their work as colleagues.

METHODS

To explore this topic, I conducted an IRB-approved study, centered on structured interviews with peer and professional tutors who were employed at the Buffalo State University Writing Center. I conducted in-person interviews of 15-20 minutes in October of 2018. The same set of questions was used for each group; participants were asked to describe their perception of their own role as a tutor, their perception of their peer or professional tutor colleagues' role, and the ways they interact and/or collaborate with their colleagues. Participation was optional, and the choice of whether to participate held no benefits or consequences. Fourteen out of fifteen tutors participated—seven professional tutors and seven peer tutors.

The peer tutors consisted of five undergraduate students and two graduate students, whose majors included English, political science, speech-language pathology, and hospitality administration. Their length of employment in the Center ranged from several months to three years, and their ages ranged from 19 to 26. All professional tutors were part-time employees working between 10 and 20 hours per week at the Center with their length of employment varying from 6 months to 10 years. Their ages spanned a wide range: two in their 30s, two in their 40s, one in their 50s, and two in their 70s. Holding advanced degrees, all had significant teaching and/or tutoring experience prior to being hired at the center. Two were retired from careers in academia, two had full-time academic jobs at other local institutions, and three worked part-time as adjuncts at other local institutions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I coded the transcriptions, and then focused the codes into “tighter and more conceptual categories” (Saldaña 116). Next, I counted, compared, and analyzed these categories as they appeared in the peer tutors' interviews and in the professional tutors' interviews to notice areas of thematic overlap or contrast. I focus here on three of the themes that best address my research question of how peer and professional tutors perceive each other as colleagues.

Theme 1: Peer and professional tutors have mutual respect for each others' work.

When reflecting on their perceptions of their peer or professional tutor colleagues' roles, all fourteen participants noted that, overall, the peer and professional tutor roles are more similar than different. As one peer tutor explained, “When it comes down to it, we all have the same goals.” Professional tutors made similar comments, with one noting, “We bring to the roles different experiences, but we basically all do the same thing . . . help people improve their writing.”

Despite this shared belief that their work is the same at its core, six out of the seven peer tutors asserted that professional tutors were better at helping students. As one peer tutor stated,

“[Professional tutors] have got all their tools on their toolbelt compared to peer tutors who are still adding.” Another noted that professional tutors are “better at doing all those things you find in writing guidebooks.” While none of the professional tutors stated that they were “better” tutors, several of them did acknowledge that because of lack of experience, peer tutors face different challenges, having to do more “learning on their feet.” One professional tutor noted that “the struggles are...different for peer tutors” and described the contrast between her approach and theirs:

[I think] it's easier for me to only go through a few corrections and then instruct it and say, 'Oh, so what you want to do for the rest of your paper is look for these certain errors,' whereas I think that . . . there's a real tension where the peer tutors want to be very helpful and get through the entire paper and also don't want to be off-putting and may not have had as much teaching experience, whereas I'll say, 'These are the things that I'd like for you to work on, this is what you should do.'

While this comment acknowledges that lack of experience can make peer tutors' work more difficult, professional tutors stopped short of suggesting that peer tutors' work is of lesser quality or lacks value. These observations contrast with the findings from Sanyal and Shea's survey of faculty tutors about their experiences working in a writing center that also employs peer tutors.³ Their study found a disconnect between the two groups, with faculty tutors expressing “veiled and explicit critiques” (95) of their peer tutor colleagues and the opinion that the nature and quality of the work they do is different. While a number of factors might account for this difference, one may lie in approaches to tutor training. The faculty tutors in Sanyal and Shea's study were not required to complete any tutor training. On the other hand, all the Buffalo State Writing Center's staff meetings and training sessions are required for both peer and professional tutors, providing them with opportunities to learn and talk together about their tutoring experiences. This shared professional development gives professional tutors a useful window into peer tutors' challenges and successes with their work, perhaps contributing to their framing of peer tutors' lack of experience as a challenge rather than a deficit.

Theme 2: Both peer and professional tutors learned from each other.

Peer tutors reported learning from the professional tutors' expertise. Some described being able to ask questions or seek second opinions from professional tutors, while others learned from simply working in the same space. As one peer tutor described, “If I like how they approach something, I'm comfortable . . . asking why they did it that way or how I should do it in the future.” This learning from colleagues operated in both directions; all seven professional tutors discussed learning from their peer tutor colleagues, with five of the seven specifically citing the importance of peer tutors' perspectives and intellectual energy as students. One professional tutor noted how much she enjoys chatting with peer tutors during downtime in the center: “We tend to talk about what they're doing in their classes . . . it's fun to hear about all these things that everyone is working on, and I think, 'oh! I need to look up that author' or 'I need to reconsider what I thought about this issue.’” Another said that because peer tutors are “right there in the trenches, taking their own classes right now and tutoring all at once,” they “have an energy and freshness they bring to the Writing Center.”

Three of the seven professional tutors also described learning specific tutoring approaches from peer tutors, with a professional noting “peer tutors tend to take more time” at the beginning of a tutoring session to get to know the student, in contrast to her tendency to move through the paper quickly. Observing peer tutors, then, reminds her to “slow down, which is something that

[she] need[s] to work on.” Similar to the peer tutors’ observations, professional tutors also mentioned the benefits of overhearing their peer tutor colleagues: “The majority of [my learning from peer tutors] comes from working side by side and then absorbing that as we go.” Another noted that she learns from peer tutors “all the time” through “listen[ing] to a wonderful way that someone is asking a question trying to get a response or trying to work on a more creative level.”

This mutual learning that participants described evokes the community of practice learning model, developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in which groups with similar goals improve their practice as a result of regular collaboration. While this lens is often applied to the peer-to-peer aspects of writing center work, R. Mark Hall argues that it is particularly apt for “the context . . . where experienced consultants . . . play a central role in educating novices” and is “useful for understanding teaching and learning among old-timers and newcomers” (94). The comments from participants in this study about their reciprocal learning support Hall’s assertion and suggest possibilities for further study of communities of practice comprised of both peer and professional tutors.

To complicate matters, however, only two peer tutor participants expressed an awareness that their professional tutor colleagues also learned from them. This lack of awareness—paired with the fact that most peer tutors perceived professional tutors as “better” at the job—suggests that prioritizing knowledge sharing between both groups would be beneficial. Since much of the learning participants described seems to have occurred informally, offering both peer and professional tutors the opportunity to more formally present on an area of expertise (such as particular genres, styles, or assignments) might help *all* tutors better appreciate the important role they play in the writing center’s ecosystem.

Theme 3: A mixed staff model is best for students.

All fourteen tutors expressed a belief that employing both peer and professional tutors makes a writing center stronger overall. As a professional tutor noted:

It is good for peer tutors to work with professional tutors to watch [them] explain . . . concepts and . . . think, ‘so that’s another way that I can get this idea across.’ But in the reverse, I’ll hear a peer tutor . . . say something that’s a little bit fresher because [we professional tutors] tend to get stuck in our ways.

As a result of these informal observations each group of tutors reported expanding their own repertoires, becoming more well-rounded and skilled in their work with students.

Both groups also cited the benefit of students having options.⁴ One professional tutor noted, “A student may feel more comfortable working with a student” because it feels “less intimidating” and they have “a shared kind of place...they’re coming from.” On the other hand, a peer tutor noted that “plenty of students...need the...teacherly kind of structured session that a professional tutor could offer.”

Another benefit that both groups discussed was the way peer tutors provide professional tutors with a student perspective, better positioning them to work with the students they tutor. As one professional tutor stated, “[working alongside peer tutors] keeps me more in step with the institution and [students’] relationships and feelings to the institution.” Another mentioned that peer tutors often share with professional tutors their “familiarity with assignments” and other direct experiences with particular courses or professors, helping professional tutors be better prepared to help students in those courses. These findings echo Siemann’s experiences at a STEM-

focused institution employing both peer and professional tutors. There, professional tutors mentored peer tutors who shadowed the professionals as part of their training; at the same time, Siemann found that the peer tutors—through sharing their experiences as STEM students—provided important insights to their professional tutor colleagues. She concludes that “a mixed model incorporating both professional and peer tutoring staff is ideal” at an institution like hers (113). The findings in my study indicate that the benefits of this mixed model are not limited to STEM schools. While scholars (Mackiewicz; Dinitz and Harrington) have highlighted the benefits of tutors having disciplinary expertise, Siemann’s study—and this one—suggest that the kind of institutional expertise that peer tutors can provide may be just as important.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that peer and professional tutors can establish mutual respect while working to meet shared goals, that reciprocal learning occurs between both groups, and that a combination of peer and professional tutors strengthens the center as a whole. It also suggests that peer and professional tutors engaging in shared professional development may play a role in creating this environment. And though external factors initially influenced our tutors sharing the same space, this study helped us to recognize the benefits of this proximity. As such, our newly remodeled space contains no cubicles, but instead offers an open workspace where both peer and professional tutors conduct their sessions. Future research should explore these and other factors that may help create successful communities of practice comprised of both peer and professional tutors.

NOTES

1. Megan Swihart Jewell and Joseph Cheatle use a similar definition in their edited collection, *Redefining Roles: The Professional, Faculty, and Graduate Consultant’s Guide to Writing Centers*, describing professional writing consultants as those “who are not primarily teaching and who are not enrolled as graduate or undergraduate students...those hired to work exclusively (or near exclusively) in the writing center” (3).
2. Based on the survey question’s other categories, the WCRP defines professional staff by default as a writing center worker who is not a student, faculty member, or volunteer.
3. Although Sanyal and Shea’s study participants were faculty tutors (whose primary responsibility was teaching and secondary assignment was tutoring) as opposed to the professional tutors in this study (who were only employed by the institution as tutors), their findings are relevant in that they portray perceptions of peer tutors by more experienced academic professionals in a mixed model writing center.
4. Our appointment system software lists tutors’ roles and allows students to select their tutor accordingly.

WORKS CITED

- Babcock, Rebecca Day, and Terese Thonus. *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice*. 2nd ed., Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2018.
- Bell, James H. "Better Writers: Writing Center Tutoring and the Revision of Rough Drafts." *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5-20. *Taylor and Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2002.10850133>.

- Bright, Alison. "Cultivating Professional Writing Tutor Identities at a Two-year College." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 12-14.
<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/62927>.
- Chilbert, Elizabeth. "When Roles Collide: On Being a Writing Center Tutor and Composition Instructor." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2008,
<http://www.praxisuwc.com/chilbert-52>.
- Dinitz, Sue, and Susanmarie Harrington. "The Role of Disciplinary Expertise in Shaping Writing Tutorials." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2014, pp. 73-98,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43443372>.
- Hall, R. Mark. "Theory in/to Practice: Using Dialogic Reflection to Develop a Writing Center Community of Practice." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2011, pp. 82-105.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43442358>.
- Jewell, Megan Swihart, and Joseph Cheatle, editors. *Redefining Roles: The Professional, Faculty, and Graduate Consultant's Guide to Writing Centers*. UP of Colorado, 2021.
- Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge UP, 1991.
- Mackiewicz, Jo. "The Effects of Tutor Expertise in Engineering Writing: A Linguistic Analysis of Writing Tutors' Comments." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 47, no. 4, Dec. 2004, pp. 316-28, DOI: 10.1109/TPC.2004.840485.
- Saldaña, Johnny. *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Sanyal, Arundhati, and Kelly A. Shea. "Teachers Versus Tutors: Is There a Place for Faculty Tutors in a University Writing Center?" *Redefining Roles: The Professional, Faculty, and Graduate Consultant's Guide to Writing Centers*, edited by Megan Swihart Jewell and Joseph Cheatle, UP of Colorado, pp. 86-100.
- Siemann, Catherine. "Faculty and Professional Consultants, the Writing Center, and STEM." *Redefining Roles: The Professional, Faculty, and Graduate Consultant's Guide to Writing Centers*, edited by Megan Swihart Jewell and Joseph Cheatle, UP of Colorado, pp. 111-22.
- Strang, Steven. "Staffing a Writing Center with Professional Tutors." *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*, edited by Christina Murphy and Byron Stay, Routledge, 2006, pp. 291-99.
- "Writing Centers Research Project Survey." (2020-21 data set). *Purdue Writing Lab Research*. Purdue University,
https://owl.purdue.edu/research/writing_centers_research_project_survey.html.