



Writing Beyond Expectations: A Collaboration Between Tutors-in-Training and First-Year Multilingual Writers

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QUESTIONS INFORMING OUR PROJECT

Would a required tutoring activity, in which multilingual freshmen in a first-year writing course meet with tutors-in-training to discuss early and late drafts of an assignment, benefit both writers and tutors? Would the diverse strengths and challenges of writers from different linguistic backgrounds prove too challenging for a tutor practicum? Would the Generation 1.5 (Gen. 1.5) writers, originally from the Dominican Republic, Greece, Bangladesh, China, and the United States (including Puerto Rico), learn to revise in meaningful ways and appreciate the value of what our writing center has to offer? Finally, would tutors gain insights into the way writers approach the composition process?

These were the considerations when embarking on a collaboration between our classes. The Art of Tutoring Writing (taught by Lynne) is a three-credit English elective that prepares undergraduate upperclassmen to tutor in our writing center, while First-Year Writing Seminar (taught by Meg) is a core requirement and one of eight sections designated for multilingual students. This

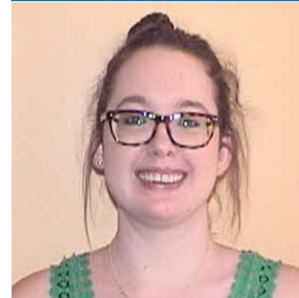
collaboration provided important insights into the way our writing center designs tutor training and underscored the importance of reaching out to students new to the university so that they may experience early on the power of collaborative work with peer tutors.

BACKGROUND

Our writing center, housed in the English Department at Boston College, was in its third pilot year in the fall of 2021 when we initiated this collaboration. Prior to this, the university had no center dedicated solely to writing support with trained peer tutors. Multilingual students, in particular, had few options for targeted linguistic support on campus. At our institution, approximately 9% of undergraduates are international, and half of these hail from home countries where English is not the official language. Post-pandemic, we experienced an increase in Gen. 1.5 students when the university adopted a test-optional admissions policy. Furthermore, first-year students, who typically visit the center in robust numbers, had completed two years of high school marked by disruption. Scholars have written about the “incoming skills gap” (Sommers and Saltz; Goldschmidt et al.)—what instructors expect their students to know before entering college and what they actually know—but, due to the sustained effect of the pandemic, this gap was more pronounced. During the previous academic year (2020-21), 40% of our center’s 430 appointments



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supported multilingual students. Therefore, it is important for our tutors to gain practical experience in addressing the goals of a wide range of writers.

A newly designated First-Year Writing Seminar for Gen. 1.5 students led us to consider the need for direct support outside of the classroom. Previously, Gen. 1.5 students, who self-select into multilingual sections during summer advising, would find themselves in classes populated by international students who were placed based on a required writing assessment. Designating Meg's section for Gen. 1.5 students arose from increased awareness that the needs of these groups differ: Gen. 1.5 students, who often develop English informally through social interactions, may exhibit strong oral production skills. These "ear learners" (Reid) may speak without an accent and be adept at navigating informal speech. However, unlike many international multilingual students, sometimes referred to as "eye learners" (Reid), the Gen. 1.5 students may not have studied English grammar and academic vocabulary formally, so that the two groups bring very different strengths and challenges to their writing. In addition to this newly designated section, we hoped to provide support outside the classroom through our writing center. Grant Eckstein argues that Gen. 1.5 writers "very much need the kind of specialized and individual support a writing center can provide, including agenda negotiation and practices of offering vocabulary or language assistance to meet very specific needs" (22).

TUTOR TRAINING

Ten undergraduate students were enrolled in the required tutor practicum in the fall of 2021. Their first assignment was to compose their own writer origin story. They would be employed as writing tutors, after all, and understanding their unique relationship to writing would be important. During class time, they discussed drafts in pairs to experience the vulnerability that many who enter a writing center may experience. Drawing on Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, the tutors approached these conversations with a focus on meaning-making, and writers were encouraged to first locate the "center of gravity" (7) in their work to begin the session. Reflecting on these ideas in discussion, students noted the most effective questions that pushed writers to dig deeper while also remaining in control of the draft. Several drew on Jeff Brooks' suggestion to assign discreet writing tasks (4) to help their partners make connections, clarify meaning, and inject energy into their work. In addition to sharing drafts with one another, tutors read sample drafts submitted by multilingual writers who visited the center during previous semesters. They were asked to devise a plan for discussing these drafts and were encouraged to look beyond the lexical and grammatical concerns characteristic of second language (L2) writing and, instead, locate the logic behind the writer's work as a starting point for discussion.

FIRST-YEAR WRITING

Meanwhile, in the First-Year Writing Seminar, students began their first assignment, a personal narrative exploring their challenges operating between linguistic borders. Many wrote about obstacles faced while transitioning from their home language to English after arriving in the United States. They were required to complete several drafts, solicit feedback by meeting with an assigned tutor, revise, and meet with the same tutor again to edit. The first draft was purely generative—the "child's draft" (Lamott) in which words pour freely onto the paper without the author pausing to revise—and became the basis for their first conversation with tutors.

TUTORS AND WRITERS COLLABORATE

Tutors met with their assigned writers for the first time during week five of the semester. Jaclyn Wells argues that "tutor fit" (98) is an important consideration for a required tutoring activity: the

learning styles and interests of Meg's writers were matched with the particular strengths and personalities of Lynne's tutors. For example, a first-year student studying in the school of education was paired with a tutor who expressed interest in teaching after graduation, while a tutor who was completing a creative honors thesis was paired with a first-year writer whose narrative had creative elements. Meg presented the collaboration to her freshmen as "an opportunity to improve their writing and writing process" (Wells 106). Each tutor met with her student twice: the first 45-minute session focused on higher-order concerns and conversations centered around meaning-making and developing ideas. The second session, later in the semester, would focus on lower-order concerns and polishing prose for a final draft.

After the first session, Lynne's tutors were asked to explore moments of success as well as things they might do differently when reflecting in their weekly discussion post-assignment. Most described feeling "nervous" before the first meeting but believed they had productive conversations that led to writers devising a clear plan for revision. Several mentioned incorporating a free-writing task that allowed their tutees to uncover connections to strengthen the draft. A tutor who worked with a native Mandarin speaker described how she questioned the writer about a metaphor that did not seem to connect to the larger theme. She indicated the line that had confused her, "there was a lemon brewed in my heart, which was bitterness," and pushed the writer to use this as a starting point for a free-write to locate connections to her main point. This tutor explained that the task allowed the writer to do just this and that she, the tutor, was "amazed" by the deeper meaning this contributed to the draft. Another tutor whose student was at first resistant to engage in writing was eventually encouraged to do so when he admitted he had "no idea" how to end his paper. The meaning-making in these sessions unfolded as both conversations between tutor and writer and freewriting tasks that allowed the writer to uncover what they had been struggling to say.

This early draft served as "an act of communication" (Severino 59) allowing tutors a glimpse into the lived experiences of writers who shared moments of vulnerability in their narratives. Meg noted that her students were energized after this meeting and dug deeply into meaningful revision. Since this population had no previous experience with tutoring, Meg emphasized that suggestions were just that: suggestions. By leaving ownership in the writers' hands, tutors provided space for them to be creative and brave as they crafted a story to share with their developing community.

Tutors and writers met again two weeks later to discuss penultimate drafts. This time, the focus turned to strategies for self-editing. To prepare for this session, tutors considered language differences in L2 writing as a resource rather than a hindrance. This "translingual approach" (Horner) encourages "an attitude of deliberative inquiry" (304) when considering features that differ from Standard Written English. Rather than simply indicating errors, tutors were encouraged to ask questions about language use. In fact, the group, in one class discussion, decided to eliminate the word "error" from conversations they would have with their tutees. In her written reflection after this second meeting, one tutor drew on that week's assigned reading, "Mother Tongue," by Amy Tan, which explores the different varieties of English spoken in her Chinese-American family. This tutor noted "the many versions of language" students bring to their writing and the importance of recognizing the validity of each language within different contexts. Others drew on Paul Matsuda and Michelle Cox's "accommodationist stance" (45) where readers are encouraged to note accented features in writing but to encourage the writer to make editing decisions. This will allow the writer to "learn new discourse patterns without

completely losing the old so that the writer can maintain both his L1 and L2 linguistic and cultural identities” (45).

The first-year writers’ responses to the sessions with their tutors were overwhelmingly positive in both classroom conversation and anonymous surveys. Writers described their tutors as “really encouraging” and underlined the value of having a “pair of fresh eyes” to help them “break down” ideas they were “struggling to put down on paper.” One said he felt “astonished” because his tutor was “interested in helping [him] and listening to [his] ideas.” Another found that he “surprisingly” learned more about *his own experiences* as he talked through them. These experiences led to more confident drafts. Students, at large, felt they had the *permission* to tell their story, and having the support of their tutors helped them make bolder revisions. The following is an excerpt from a student’s first draft where he compares home life to college: “If I was home I would have reacted with violence but I can’t because that is not me anymore coming here [...] has changed me in a way where I feel safe from violence back home and at peace due to me not worrying about making it home at the end of the day or looking over my shoulder.”

This is the revised version:

Now that I am here, I feel at peace because I don’t have to be aware of my surroundings or worry about making it home at night. In Rhode Island, I felt physically unsafe but mentally supported because I was in that environment for my whole life. But at [the university], I feel physically safe, but mentally out of place because this environment is nothing like home. However, I have a fresh start and I need to take advantage of that, I will not lose my opportunity for anyone.

The revision illustrates the work the student did to be more specific, vulnerable, and aware of audience after meeting with his tutor. In fact, though students were only asked to meet twice, this student found the experience so valuable that he developed a lasting friendship with his tutor.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE

Perhaps the most meaningful component of the collaboration was when tutors and writers came together one evening over a shared meal to celebrate the final drafts. These had been graded and were discussed as finished texts which everyone, tutors and writers, read ahead of time. Five minutes were devoted to each essay with three speakers responsible for contributing to the discussion: each essay was introduced by one of the writer’s peers from class (assigned ahead of time). That student shared favorite moments from the work. Next, the writer’s tutor did the same, while also pointing out their favorite revision moves. When it was the writer’s turn to talk, they reflected on working with their tutor and noted what was most helpful for their revision process. This dialogue allowed students themselves to become “actively engaged in the conversation about writing” (Scudder et al. 19) and compelled writers and tutors to build metacognitive awareness as each considered the strategies employed during this collaboration: writers reflected on the process they would employ in future assignments while tutors considered their approach to writing center work and the process that would shape this. One tutor, in the reflection submitted after the collaboration had ended, wrote: “My most important takeaway [...] is that we can tutor students without taking away the essence of their writing and their voice.” Another described the importance of validating the experiences students bring to their writing and establishing the conversation as a “safe and inclusive space free of judgment or overt criticism.”

One of the goals of the collaboration was showing writers their voices have value by fostering a constructive, supportive audience of trained tutors. In the First-year Writing Seminar, seven out of twelve students completed course evaluations: six marked “strongly agree” and one, “agree,” that collaborating with their tutors helped them develop as writers. Students described the “value” they felt in their interactions and found tutors to be “encouraging,” “insightful,” and “welcoming” as they worked to make their essays “even better than before.” Students indicated that the strategies they learned allowed them to critically assess their own work and to learn something they could “apply in all of [their] writings” moving forward.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It would have been interesting to track the first-year writers' visits to our center after the required tutoring activity. In terms of their growth as writers, it is difficult to establish any definitive metric. This response to the collaboration, however, speaks to the spirit of the project:

If I can compare this experience with something, I would compare it to a history book. Every one of us had a unique history of being a language learner. It all started with being clueless, then to adapting, learning, fighting, and finally ending [. . .] I did not expect to produce a final draft the way I did, but through the help of my tutor, my peers, and [my professors], I created a paper that was above my expectations.

The role of writing instructors and tutors mirrors the tour guide archetype: by engaging with student writing, we accompany them as they navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the academy. It is important to “[show] them they have much to give and much to gain” through this process (Sommers and Saltz 147). Collaborative work is an important way to ensure first-year students recognize there is space to share their voices with the larger community during a period of intense transition.

In course evaluations for *The Art of Tutoring Writing*, one student wrote of the transformative nature of the collaboration, describing it as “the single-most meaningful experience throughout my entire [...college] career [...] Being a tutor has enabled me to make a difference in the lives of students [...] by reassuring them of their place here....” Another said, “The lessons devoted to how to tutor [multilingual students] were incredibly helpful and made it less overwhelming to approach papers [with] a lot going on.” Still another said the course “prompted really important discussions [...] about privilege and different student experiences.”

Responses suggest that pairing tutors-in-training with Gen. 1.5 writers not only provided important strategies for supporting a diverse range of writers, but it gave tutors a glimpse into the lived experiences of some students at our private university and perhaps, an enlarged understanding of what it means to make meaningful connections in our increasingly globalized world.

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