

Peer tutors as learning and teaching partners: a cumulative approach to building peer tutoring capacity in higher education

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Abstract

Peer tutors in higher education are frequently given vital teaching and learning work to do, but the training or professional development and support opportunities they are offered vary, and more often than not peer tutors are under-supported. In order to create and sustain teaching and learning environments that are better able to facilitate students' engagement with knowledge and learning, the role of peer tutors needs to be recognised differently, as that of learning and teaching partners to both lecturers and students. Tutors then need to be offered opportunities for more in-depth professional academic development in order to fully realise this role. This paper explores a tutor development programme within a South African writing centre that aimed at offering tutors such ongoing and cumulative opportunities for learning and growth using a balanced approach, which included scholarly research and practice-based training. Using narrative data tutors provided in reflective written reports, the paper explores the kinds of development in tutors' thinking and action that are possible when training and development is theoretically informed, coherent, and oriented towards improving practice.

Keywords: academic development, academic literacies, cumulative learning, higher education, peer tutoring, writing centres.

Introduction

In South Africa and other contexts, like the United States and Canada, postgraduate student tutors, or teaching assistants, are given important roles to play in facilitating student learning in higher education. They are asked to design learning events, such as tutorials, may assist in assessment or evaluation of student work, such as assignments or tests, and consult with students outside of tutorials about their coursework. In spite of this valuable role postgraduate student peer tutors (hereafter tutors) play in higher education, there is disparity in the kinds of professional or educational support, training and development offered to them by their universities or the lecturers in whose courses they tutor. In South Africa, in spite of localised improvements in the recognition and development of tutors (see Layton, 2013; Underhill and McDonald, 2010) student tutors are more often than not under-valued and poorly supported in the contexts in which they are employed.

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There is an assumption that tutors already possess the knowledge and skills they may need to facilitate students' learning effectively, both in terms of disciplinary knowledge and also tutoring knowledge (Underhill and McDonald, 2010). This assumption often leaves even the most capable and dedicated tutors frustrated and without relevant support. What tutors are in need of, regardless of their level of interest in or prior experience of tutoring, is opportunities to develop both their contextual or disciplinary knowledge (which they are expected to assist students with), as well as facilitation, assessment and feedback-giving practices that are relevant to their kind and level of tutoring work.

There are two key, but often overlooked aspects of tutor development in higher education that need attention: the first is the role of the lecturers and/or coordinators that tutors work for and with. Lecturers and tutors should be partners in creating and sustaining effective teaching and learning environments for students, thus lecturers need to play a pivotal role in helping tutors realise their partnership role in ways best suited to the teaching and learning goals of the department, and academic discipline (Layton and McKenna, 2015; Underhill and McDonald, 2010). Tutors need guidance on how to facilitate learning effectively within the specific disciplinary or departmental context in which the tutoring occurs. This guidance and ongoing contact with the lecturer would provide peer tutors with a valuable touchpoint in striving to create a responsive learning environment.

The second, related aspect that needs to be more fully considered is the need for a support and development programme for tutors that is coherent, underpinned by relevant theory and research in higher education studies, and that works to cumulatively (Maton, 2015) build peer tutors' knowledge, skills and dispositions in relation to their work with students. This kind of cumulative development cannot happen effectively in ad hoc generic workshops on aspects of tutoring that happen outside of academic disciplines and departments (although generic workshops could be part of a holistic development strategy if carefully incorporated). Nor can this kind of development happen without conscious attention to who tutors are, the kinds of experience and knowledge they bring into tutoring with them, and the ways in which they need to be supported taking into account both their psycho-social and academic needs (Underhill and McDonald, 2010).

This paper argues that, given the increasingly visible and important role tutors play in higher education (Layton and McKenna, 2015; Layton, 2013), the ways in which academic departments support, train and develop tutor capacity needs to be critically re-examined and reimagined. Specifically, the paper argues for reimagining tutor development and support in structured, research-led, and cumulative rather than ad hoc ways. This approach necessitates the design and implementation of context- or discipline-based peer tutor development programmes that are underpinned by relevant theory drawn from the broader field of higher education studies. Using an illustrative case study approach, the paper explores possible outcomes of a structured, research-led, cumulatively designed professional development approach to educating tutors within a university writing centre in South Africa. This kind of approach aims to bring peer tutors more effectively into the teaching and learning environments in which they are working as more able and included partners to both lecturers and students.

Peer tutoring in higher education

Higher education sectors around the world have seen a rise in the interest in and use of peer tutoring as a form of student academic assistance or development in the last four decades, starting in the 1970s with open admissions and increased participation in higher education by ‘non-traditional and often under-prepared students’ (O’Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi, 2009: 1) in the United States. More recently, increased use of peer tutoring programmes in higher education has been noted in the United Kingdom (Gunn, 2007), Australia (Bell and Mladenovic, 2015), and South Africa (Underhill and McDonald, 2010; Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014). Peer tutors, part of higher education’s casual labour force, are taking on more teaching and learning work, yet struggle to work effectively in environments characterised by a lack of relevant and appropriate opportunities for professional development, training and support (Bell and Mladenovic, 2015; Underhill and McDonald, 2010).

There are examples of well-structured, context-specific peer tutoring programmes, but much of the research on peer tutor development published in the last two decades has focused on writing centres (Bell, 2001; Brasington and Smeets, 2009; O’Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi, 2009), and extended curriculum programmes, foundation year support, or tutoring in English for Academic Purposes (Blaj-Ward, 2014; Clark, 1998; Underhill, 2009). In cases where studies on disciplinary peer tutor training programmes have been undertaken, it has been noted that disciplinary lecturers and tutor coordinators are often reluctant to offer training and support directly to their tutors, preferring to outsource this to academic development staff for logistical or resource-related reasons (Layton and McKenna, 2015; Underhill and McDonald, 2010). However, at the same time it is noted that in order to enable peer tutors to be the kind of academic advisors to students that universities need them to be, discipline-based support and training is essential (Bell and Mladenovic, 2015; Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014).

A large number of tutors and teaching assistants are not professional tutors, but are rather students themselves, usually postgraduate, but in some cases senior undergraduate students (Underhill and McDonald, 2010). Their position as students themselves comes with advantages and disadvantages in terms of participating in a tutorial programme charged with enhancing students’ literacy practices, engagement with knowledge and therefore success at university. In terms of advantages, student peer tutors are closer in experience to the students they tutor, so students tend to feel more comfortable sharing struggles with tutors. Further, tutors may have more relevant advice for tutees, whose experiences they can relate to more readily than lecturers perhaps can (Beck et al., 1978). Following this, if tutors are able to develop these open relationships with students, they may be able to bring students’ concerns to lecturers, who may not be able to readily access this information if they are teaching large classes where they are unable to know each student personally. Large class teaching is increasingly common in many higher education contexts, making this contact between tutors and students in smaller, more intimate learning environments increasingly important and valuable (Underhill and McDonald, 2010; Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014).

There are, however, disadvantages to having students act as peer tutors, and take on a portion of the responsibility for enhanced student success. The main disadvantage is that, as students themselves, tutors are also still growing their own disciplinary knowledge, skills and

dispositions (Underhill and McDonald, 2010). The more knowledgeable and experienced tutors are, the less of an issue this may be, but nonetheless student tutors may not be fully able to break down difficult concepts, unpack and explain dense knowledge clearly, and create relevant learning activities that help students engage with their learning in meaningful and context-relevant ways. A further disadvantage, especially with more experienced tutors, is that they may take on too authoritative a role in tutoring, acting as more of a lecturer than a peer advisor. An ‘academically sound’ (Beck et al., 1978: 447) peer tutor development programme is thus essential in assisting tutors with learning how to facilitate rather than direct student learning, and in growing their confidence in further developing the disciplinary knowledge and dispositions necessary for inducting students into a community of practice.

The roles and duties assigned to tutors, as detailed above, should be catered for in the training, support and development opportunities offered to them, preferably on an ongoing basis. This is, however, not always the case, as many lecturers who work with tutors in their courses feel unable or unwilling to create and manage detailed tutor support and development opportunities. This is most likely a result of overwork, lack of resources, and lack of knowledge about what designing and managing such a programme entails (Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014). What is needed, in structured academic departments where tutors have particular and important student-facing roles to play, is the creation and sustaining of collaborative communities of practice that include and support tutors as partners, and that are designed and managed by those who have the expertise and insight tutors need to learn from (Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014).

Research indicates that successful staff development work should be collaborative, taking into account lecturers’ (or peer tutors’) prior and current teaching experiences, opinions, and ideas and building on these in a collegial, mutually respectful way (Breda, Clement and Waeytens, 2003; Knight and Trowler, 2000). Collaborative and respectful staff development work can be achieved through creating and maintaining professional learning communities (Edwards Groves and Rönnerman, 2013), where both collaborative and individual learning is nurtured, and where, in the case of peer tutor development, lecturers and tutors could ‘learn from one another and work together’ (124).

Research on both peer tutor development and academic staff development consider the best ways of enabling ongoing knowledge development and experiential learning. There is a strong argument for creating opportunities, especially for peer tutors, to learn by doing, rather than through being told what to do. For example, O’Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi (2009) argue that peer tutors within a writing centre context learn how to engage students in conversations about their writing through the practice of tutoring, and through reflecting in a guided manner on what they have done, learning from successes and missteps. Bell and Mladenovic (2015), too, argue for a greater emphasis on peer tutors learning how to tutor well through doing, and then through reflection and feedback gleaned from peer observation.

Yet, there seems to be a balance necessary between learning *through* doing, and learning *before* doing, especially in peer tutoring where many tutors are themselves students and in need of both kinds of support. Bell (2001) argues that although peer tutors can learn a great deal from trying out different approaches to tutoring and critically reflecting on these to explore improvements and change, a more structured approach may be needed. Bell (2001) therefore wonders whether peer tutors would benefit from having a clear ‘philosophy’ of

tutoring (89), or theoretically informed approach, that can provide them with a lens on practice, as well as a touchpoint to refer to when they meet resistance from students who want tutors to do the work for them or tell them what to write. He argues that reflection on practice is valuable and can promote consciousness-raising and change in thinking and behaviour, but is itself not necessarily enough. Through ongoing, more in-depth development and support, underpinned by a clear philosophy on tutoring, tutors may be better enabled to grow in both skill and confidence over time (Bell, 2001).

In the UWC Writing Centre's peer tutor development programme - the illustrative case study drawn on in this paper - Academic Literacies has been utilised as a guiding philosophy underpinning peer tutoring practice in enabling student learning. It also provides a structured framework for peer tutor development, as all practical tools and approaches used align with this overall philosophy. The following section will look at how Academic Literacies was applied specifically in this case, but draws implications for other tutoring contexts.

Academic Literacies: building a clear philosophy on enabling student learning

Academic Literacies is termed a critical field of inquiry that has its own ideology - that of transformation - and its own epistemology - that of literacy as social practice (Lillis and Scott, 2007). Academic literacies in higher education are developed in specific socio-cultural contexts, in most cases academic disciplines, that function to define and delimit what literacies are important and valuable, and what forms these should take. Literacy practices in different disciplines will shift and change over time, yet approaching learning with the ideological and epistemological lens provided by Academic Literacies as a field enables teaching and learning to see, understand, and elucidate these shifts and changes for students new to these contexts. The social context, and the practices it values, will shape what literacy practices need to be developed, as well as the means for developing students' ways of coming to know and demonstrating their level or depth of knowledge.

Academic literacy practices are not hegemonic and unchanging, and the ways in which they are taught and learned should create space for students (and those tutoring them) to challenge how meaning is made, and how it is demonstrated in written or oral forms (Archer, 2010; Jacobs, 2014; Lea and Street, 1998). Rather than simply accepting and teaching dominant academic practices as the norm, an Academic Literacies approach to teaching, learning and tutoring would create space for questions, such as: 'Why do we use evidence in this way in making an argument? Are there other ways in which we could make this argument? Would these alternatives create stronger or weaker arguments? Why do we need strong arguments?' and so on (see Jacobs, 2014). In sum, Academic Literacies, as a field, is underpinned by an ideology of transformation, through approaching literacy development as a set of social practices within particular socio-cultural contexts that can and do shift, change and reform themselves over time (Jacobs, 2014; Lillis and Scott, 2007).

This critical approach to literacy development and engagement with knowledge and learning is a useful framework and philosophy for tutoring for two reasons. The first reason concerns engagement of and with students in their own learning processes. The main benefit of tutorials is that they create more intimate, student-centred learning environments where students are visible, known by name, and actively engaged in an aspect of their learning

(Layton and McKenna, 2015; Underhill and McDonald, 2010). An approach to tutoring underpinned by an Academic Literacies philosophy would require the creation of opportunities for students and tutors to question of the ways in which they are working with knowledge and demonstrating that knowledge (usually through their writing). Inviting questions, and inviting students to participate in finding appropriate answers, is a way of creating participatory and collaborative tutorials that encourage students to think critically about their learning. Through questioning they can become more conscious of what they know (and do not yet know), how they know it, and why it is important or useful in the context of their learning as a whole.

The second reason centres on the role of tutors in giving students feedback on their written work or in discussions during tutorials. Far from telling students what to do, or doing the work for them, peer tutors' role is to guide, prompt and advise students and act as catalysts for change, improvement and growth that students can own (Ender and Newton, 2000, cited in O'Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi, 2009). A philosophy on tutoring underpinned by Academic Literacies would ask tutors to consider how to give feedback that can catalyse improvements in students' writing and thinking such that students are able to make the improvements in ways that increasing their confidence and ability. Rather than dictating to students what they should write, or only pointing out failings, peer tutor feedback giving underpinned by Academic Literacies philosophy would prompt, advise and encourage, require students to take action, and enable them to take ownership of any success they derive improving their own writing (Clarence, 2013).

Peer tutoring in a writing centre: a case study

The UWC Writing Centre, between 2011 and 2014 - the period considered in this paper² - is staffed by a coordinator³ and an administrator who are permanently appointed, and by student peer writing tutors who are employed on a contract basis annually. The tutors are all MA and PhD students, and are selected through an application process that includes them presenting a sample of their own writing and participating in an interview in which they are asked to prepare a mock tutorial and reflect on their approach to working with student writers. Between 2011 and 2014, the Centre worked with an average of 16 tutors per year mainly from the social sciences and humanities. At least half were experienced tutors who returned each year to tutor, while the other half was new to the Centre. This was a deliberate strategy to ensure the strength and experience of the team, while bringing in new energy and new tutors each year. Tutors worked with students one on one, and also in small groups running writing workshops and advising on group assignments.

The peer tutor development programme developed and refined between 2011 and 2014 was premised on a balance between learning through action in peer tutorials and reflecting on this,, and learning through engaging with relevant scholarship in the field of

² The coordinator who designed this programme resigned at the end of 2014, thus the article cannot comment on the nature of the programme in detail now, although elements of it have remained in place, such as the extended training opportunities, and the weekly meetings.

³ The coordinator, like a disciplinary lecturer, had specialist interest in and knowledge of the field in which the writing centre work was located. In this case, the coordinator had specialist knowledge in academic literacy development, academic writing, peer tutoring and academic staff development in higher education.

higher education studies, specifically academic literacies research, and applying this in practice and reflection. This balance ensured that peer tutors had experiential knowledge to guide their ongoing tutoring practice, but that they also had a critical lens through which to view, assess and challenge that practice, as well as a holding structure to fall back on when students challenged or resisted their collaborative ways of tutoring (see Bell, 2001).

Over the course of an academic year (roughly 28 weeks) peer writing tutors were introduced to a set of conceptual and practical approaches to writing from an Academic Literacies perspective incrementally through reading key texts and participating in participatory workshops based on scholarship and innovations in the field (Reading examples included Lillis and Turner (2001): 'Student Writing in Higher Education: contemporary confusion, traditional concerns' and Archer (2010): 'Challenges and potentials for Writing Centres in South African tertiary institutions', among others). Both the coordinator and peer tutors were able to select texts and facilitate reading groups and workshops, as this was a collaborative, shared aspect of the programme.

Engagement with scholarly texts was usually facilitated through the selector(s) of the text setting guiding questions around the focus of the reading group. For example, if the focus was feedback giving, the person(s) leading the discussion would set a few questions prompting the group to think about particular issues around feedback, usually connected to tutors' concerns or need for guidance. Tutors who selected texts tended to do so based on their own concerns or interests; the coordinator drew on her formal observations of tutors⁴ and overall aims for the programme to select relevant topics for meetings that contributed to tutors' overall development. Notes on the questions were brought to the meeting, and through discussion relevant implications were drawn for tutoring practices within the Centre, so that the readings were applied and made useful, rather than remaining abstract.

The peer tutor development programme was ongoing throughout the year, beginning with an initial set of intensive introductory workshops over two days at the start of the academic year, and continuing through weekly 45-minute long meetings throughout each semester. The ongoing meetings were designed to build from the initial intensive training and development workshops to cumulatively build the knowledge, skills and dispositions or aptitudes towards peer tutoring that are required by the Writing Centre's mission, vision and pedagogical goals. In brief, overall we focused on both *students as writers*, and helping them to build their confidence and knowledge about writing over the longer term through productive approaches to tutoring, such as reading their work with them, offering novel tools and advice for revisions and so on, and we focused on *the writing* they brought to tutorials for advice and assistance (see Archer, 2010). We focused on helping students to become more confident and capable writers through creating a space for *conversations* in which tutor and tutee are peers, and the power differentials are reduced (see Gillam, Callaway and Wikoff, 1994); and we aimed in each tutorial to get the student writer from their present place to their

⁴ All tutors were formally observed during a tutorial, with the students' permission, at least once per semester. Feedback was recorded on a rubric that was collectively workshopped and developed in 2012, and tutor and coordinator would meet post-observation to debrief. Through this process, the coordinator was able to monitor tutors' development, and their application of the principles underpinning the Centre's ways of working, and the peer tutor development programme.

next productive step in their writing, encouraging them to take increasing ownership of their writing process through the kinds of feedback and advice we offered (see Deyi, 2011).

The following section reports briefly on the selection and analysis of the data presented in this paper, before considering the extracts from selected reflective reports written by peer tutors in the UWC Writing Centre used to illustrate the potential benefits of the approach used.

Methodology and data analysis

The data discussed in the paper are extracted from five sets of reflective reports written between May 2012 and December 2014, by peer tutors working in the UWC Writing Centre and participating in the peer tutor development programme outlined above. These data were selected as they represent five complete sets of consecutive reports; that is, there are five tutors in the data set who worked at the Centre for at least three consecutive years (2012-2014), and who each wrote six consecutive end-of-semester reflective reports (each May and October). These sets of reports were chosen as the paper is tracking cumulative progress linked to the implementation and development of the peer tutor programme over an extended period of time; thus tutors who only worked for a year during this time, who wrote brief or incomplete reports, or who left the Writing Centre early in this time period were excluded.

The reflective reports selected have been collated so as to identify the author of each set through the use of a letter and number (T1, etc.) and each report through the year and semester in which it was written (2013a, 2013b, etc.). All five of the tutors gave their consent to having their reports used as data for this paper, and the tutor development work this paper discusses was part of larger research that received ethics approval from the university.

In analysing the data, there were two stages of reading and coding: in the first the reports were read two or three times through, marking comments that represented themes emerging from peer tutor programme. In the second stage, the reports were more decisively organised and coded under three headings linked to the focal points of the programme. These were: tutors' indicating a building on or extension of prior knowledge and experience; tutors incorporating a focus on students and perceptions of student learning and writing in their reflections; and tutors indicating the role of research and theory in forming and reforming their thinking about writing in higher education and their role as peer writing tutors.

Tutors' reflections on their own development and learning

Before delving into the tutors' own writing in their reports, a brief account of the report structure and aims is necessary.

In 2011, the first year in which the peer tutor programme became more structured and professionalised, as well as collaborative with coordinator and peer tutors sharing the facilitation of weekly meetings, peer tutors wrote a reflective report each term in addition to brief reports on each one-on-one or small group tutorial with students. This was deemed too great an additional workload for the tutors, and led to reports being copied and pasted from term to term. Thus, in 2012, they were asked to write their guided reflections at the end of each semester, in a minimum of two pages and in response to a set of prompts (see Figure 1). This was less time-consuming, and gave tutors an opportunity to work on a short piece of writing accounting for the semester they had just worked through. It did not necessarily,

however, prevent tutors from copying and pasting comments from one semester into the next semester's report, although tutors did add new comments and observations to each report.

Figure 1: guiding prompts for peer tutors' semester reflective reports (2012-2014)

Semester report guidelines

There is no specific page limit here, but please try to keep them under 4 pages. 2-3 pages is the norm. These reports are detailed, and require you to write about the semester from various angles, drawing in theory we have read and used where relevant to deepen your reflection and also move you from your specific account to a more abstract and generalised reflection on the nature of working with student writing, or being a peer tutor, or being a writer yourselves. Please provide a reference list.

Go beyond surface level descriptions of practice. I would like you to try and locate your reflections and points within a more 'macro' level of analysis, and really try to be critical and also reflexive in your writing, especially when it comes to writing about yourself as a writing tutor. In order to be reflexive and to progress and move forwards, we need to go outside of ourselves and look to theory and practice outside of our own context to challenge and advance our thinking and analysis.

You may find this resource helpful if you struggle with reflection writing (or even just to familiarise yourself again with the terms and some hints and

tips): <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/development/reflection.html>.

Two broad areas I would like us all to write about:

- impressions and thoughts on where we think students are in terms of their writing and what we have been seeing in our tutoring work this semester - what are the things that are heartening and what is cause for concern for you? Can you find a broader context in which to locate some of these issues? What are some of the issues you have noticed in students' writing - some of the common concerns and struggles? How do you make sense of why students are struggling and where these struggles might come from? How do you make sense of how to assist them?

- where you are in your journey as a writing tutor - how have you grown so far this year or since you have started tutoring? What have you learned about yourself as a writer, or tutor, or leader? What do you feel you are doing well at and where do you think you focus your efforts in terms of self-development, and why? What are some of your own personal thoughts on the role you play in the Writing Centre, and where this places you in terms of your own career trajectory - do you feel this experience is helping you to see yourself differently as an educator, a colleague and a student?

Please write in a first person (I) rather than in a passive, 3rd person voice. This is your own personal, critical reflection and report, not an academic paper as such. It is far more engaging for me to read your voice very clearly, and I imagine it is also more fun to write in the first person.

The central aim of this reflection on practice was to raise their consciousness about what they were doing with students, and how it affected their own intellectual, interpersonal and personal development both as tutors and writers. According to O'Neill, Harrington and Bakhshi (2009), the more self-reflective tutors are about their work, the more likely they are to create a rewarding tutorial experience for students, and the more rewarding they will find tutoring as a practice.

Building on prior knowledge and experience

A key aim of the tutor development programme in the Writing Centre was to enable tutors to grow, cumulatively, both as peer tutors and as writers in their own right. All of the workshop and meeting topics chosen, both by the tutors and by the coordinator, had this aim in mind: to

enable us all to learn something new, that would build on and also challenge prior knowledge, assumptions and practices in tutoring.

These two excerpts from two of the tutors who worked in the Writing Centre between 2012 and 2014 indicate the notion of cumulative learning through engaging with students and being referred back to and building on their training around focusing on writing as a process, and helping students to take ownership of their development as writers:

... each time I interacted with students and noted the similarities of the problems that they brought, I got tempted to keep on referring back to the need for taking writing as a process. ... As such, most of my tutorials ceased to be intended for that particular assignment but aimed at cultivating those lifetime skills the students would apply to all the assignments while at this university or elsewhere. (T5, 2013b)

One of the things I am happy about in my tutorial work is that I am now able to focus on the major aspects that need attention. When I started tutoring, in 2012, I used to work on everything that needed to be corrected but I now I prioritize a few main things. In fact, I used to unconsciously apply the skills based approach where the main focus was fixing problems (Street and Lea, 1998). (T1, 2014a)

In the following two excerpts, these two tutors indicate how they have been able to build on prior knowledge and experience not only as peer tutors, but also as writers themselves:

Over the years the Writing Centre has not only provided a comfortable place for me to work but has also offered a unique opportunity for me to explore new possibilities within myself. It has provided a platform for me to help others and to develop myself as a writer and an aspiring academic. I have come in contact with students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and academic disciplines with different challenges. I have learnt from their struggles and shared in their successes, which have helped me grow as a person. In the process, I have built a repertoire of tools and strategies to engage with students in different ways during writing consultations, as well in disciplinary tutoring. Some of these strategies have also been useful in helping me find my voice in my own writing. (T3, 2013b)

Although I have been at the writing for many years, each year adds something new [sic], both to my abilities as a writing tutor, and as a student. This can be attributed to workshops and staff seminars that take place regularly. (T4, 2014b)

Whether obliquely or explicitly, these extracts from the tutors' reports reference the formal support and training facilitated by the coordinator as a subject specialist, and from engaging with peers in the regular meetings. This support has clearly made it possible for tutors to grow cumulatively, subsuming, extending and challenging prior knowledge and assumptions as they have.

Cultivating a student-centred focus through tutoring

A major focus of any tutoring programme is a focus on the students and the ways in which they are engaging with learning processes that will further their academic success, and build their confidence. Here, the tutors consider the ways in which their approaches to peer tutoring have become more overtly and consciously student-centred, indicating a focus on practice, and developing the writer as well as the writing, indicated by the Academic Literacies underpinning of the programme:

... when students brought assignments that did not fall under my area of expertise, I was tempted to ask as many questions as possible in order to familiarise myself with the issues. This approach worked wonders because on one hand, it helped me to obtain a deeper understanding of the issues at hand, to enable me to help the student, while on the other, it helped the student to dig deeper when articulating the issues around the question. (T5, 2013b)

Although most of these students have been taught specific rules for structuring different types of writing ... these instructions are rarely translated into their writing. I think this is because students see learning as segmented and cannot see the relationship between what is taught in one module and an assignment in another module. Coaching students to organise their work in a manner that supports the argument that they want to make is more challenging than providing formulas....However, the ultimate objective of my tutoring sessions...is to encourage students to understand the purpose of an assignment and organise ideas according to patterns that will make sense to a reader. (T3, 2013a)

...many students had an idea of what was required but were not always sure of their own potentials. They were not always aware of how much they knew and the value of what they knew in relation to the task. What I did was to instill that confidence and ownership of their thoughts in them and the need to give their own thoughts a chance. I managed to make some students to realize that their thoughts were good enough but often suppressed by that lack of confidence. (T4, 2013b)

These are only three excerpts of many that could have been selected from these reports, as the selected tutors' writing showed a growing and increasingly nuanced concern for students, and a growing understanding of the ways in which diversity of home and school backgrounds impacts on students' learning and on how peer tutors need to approach this diverse range of students in tutorials. The approaches they mention - asking probing questions; moving students in to the next step in their writing process; and building students self-confidence - are part of the formal tutor development programme.

Providing tutors with scaffolded means of engaging with and using relevant theory, through the reading groups and workshops, created ongoing opportunities to grapple with issues related to working with diverse groups of students.

Theorising a peer tutoring role

Theorising tutoring practice was a central feature of the peer tutor development programme, prompted by a belief that in order to reflect constructively on what we are doing and thinking with the aim of improving on weaknesses and developing strengths, we need a way of examining our actions and thoughts afresh. Relevant and appropriate theoretical lenses as ways of analysing practice can provide the means for more constructive and action-oriented reflection.

Here the tutors indicate, both tacitly and explicitly, how the theoretical texts they have read have helped them to think anew about their role as peer tutors. These extracts are fairly lengthy, but they show eloquently how the tutors have used the theoretical lenses provided in the peer tutoring programme, and also drawn from their own research, to make sense of the work they are doing.

Over the years, I have struggled with assisting mature students during writing tutorials. I will never forget an incident a few years ago when a consultation with a female 1ST year student in her 50's had to come to an end after approximately 15 minutes because we were not making any progress. The student went on to have a successful consultation with another tutor. ... I have realised that there was a problem with my approach to making that student feel welcomed at the Writing Centre. By failing to acknowledge the unique experiences of that student, I made her feel invisible and excluded from the discussion. For instance, I used examples about the distinction between writing expectations at High School and those at University to explain a point, without acknowledging the fact that she had taken a non-traditional route to get to University. This made it impossible for her to open up to me about her challenges with academic writing. According to Ivanic (1998), it is essential to consider the writer's identity in students' academic writing. Furthermore, he [sic] argues that it is also important to focus on the interaction between the students as individuals and the norms of the culture which they are operating in. Simply by acknowledging their varied backgrounds and showing empathy for their need to balance academic work, family commitments and paid work, writing tutors will be in a better position to provide the support that mature students need with academic writing tasks. (T3, 2014a)

I am happy that I no longer see struggling students as people who need fixing. At first, this mindset led me to believe that students who have "problems" in their academic work needed "therapeutic intervention". This of course is the idea held by study skills approach proponents. In fact, my use of "problems" have changed to "challenges", that is, I no longer view students' work as having problems but challenges. I now have high respect for the academic literacies approach because it has guided me to treat each student differently, knowing that each student is at a different stage in their learning journey.
(T1, 2013a)

At the University of the Western Cape, where one of the major objectives is to offer education to previously disadvantaged communities, the presence of students who are under-prepared for tertiary education and struggling with their education is a reality. Besides the above, disciplinary “truths” are increasingly being challenged in academia, with a lot of previously held notions and knowledge regimes, methods of knowledge dissemination and specific and general institutional “politics” being contested. Consequently, new ways of thinking about university education have surfaced and these new ways make central the individual needs of students, process rather than end driven interventions and have decentered certain ways of ‘knowing’ and “knowledge authority”. It is in this context that the ... UWC WC is a space that focuses on individual students’ needs and takes writing as a process. It focuses on ways of thinking, researching, reading, comprehending, questioning, making sense, knowledge synthesis and writing in a manner that makes ideas “talk” to each other, either in agreement or disagreement as determined by the specific space or context of articulation. In this way, the student is enabled to take control of the writing and to know how knowledge is constructed in different contexts. (T2, 2014a)

In sum, considering these extracts from a small sub-section of a much larger body of reflective writing by the Writing Centre tutors, this paper argues that there is significant potential for personal and professional growth and development if tutors are exposed to context-relevant, timely and coherent approaches to peer tutor development that take seriously tutors’ roles as partners to both lecturers (or tutor coordinators) and students. Academic Literacies, as a guiding philosophy and framework, is not only useful in a context like the Writing Centre discussed here; its focus on literacy development in higher education as being about the development of context-related and situated academic practices rather than discrete or general skills is applicable to and adaptable for all tutoring contexts.

A way forward for peer tutoring in higher education

Although many student tutors may only tutor for a short period of time - perhaps a year or two - during their postgraduate study, peer tutor development programmes such as the one advocated for in this paper should be prioritised and developed within universities regardless of the length of time for while tutors will be employed. Peer tutors undoubtedly benefit from more conscious, cumulative and collegial professional development, whether they tutor throughout their postgraduate study, or for shorter periods of time. Further, the lecturers who work with the tutors as part of the peer tutor development will undoubtedly gain from the engagement, as will the students that they tutors work with (Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014).

Peer tutors are a valuable part of a holistic teaching and learning environment, as their role is to assist both students and lecturers. However, in order to maximise peer tutors’ potential to work effectively to be a voice for students in conversation with lecturers, as well as facilitators and guides for students in their learning, context-specific, ongoing support, training and development opportunities are necessary. This paper has argued for a collaborative, research-led peer tutor development programme that provides a stronger foundation for tutors to build on in their own tutoring practice, and that also benefits their

own development as writers and students. Central to such a programme is the collegial space created for collaboration and mutual learning (Breda, Clement and Waeytens, 2003), an underpinning philosophy or guiding framework to focus and structure the programme elements, and the intellectual leadership provided by the coordinator, akin to a subject lecturer (Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014). This paper has argued for the use of Academic Literacies as an accessible, creative framework and philosophy for peer tutoring in higher education, within disciplinary and other contexts, such as a writing centre. Although the case presented here is a particular one, and peer writing tutors work with smaller groups of students than subject tutors in academic departments would, the learning from the tutors' reflections showing the kinds of consciousness and action such a framework enables can extend beyond this case.

Programmes such as the one outlined in this paper are not easy to create, maintain or grow; it does take time and effort and this can be a great deal to ask of already over-burdened lecturers, especially those in junior positions ((Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen, 2014). However, an approach to peer tutor development that blends experiential and theoretical learning, and that develops tutors as partners to both lecturers and students in clear, context-specific ways, has clear and long-lasting benefits for all involved. Tutors, students and lecturers working within such tutorial programmes can feel these benefits immediately. But, perhaps more importantly, the benefits can continue to echo in the work tutors do once they have completed their tutoring stints, and in the ways they may inspire, impact on and engage with both students and lecturers if spaces are created to enable them to play this partnership role effectively.

Acknowledgements

My grateful thanks extend to the peer writing tutors I worked with who generously gave me permission to use their reflective reports in this paper. Thank you, too, to the three anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful and constructive feedback.

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