

De-Centering Peer Tutors: Research Applications for Undergraduates in the Writing Program

Skyler Konicki
University of Delaware

Until recently, undergraduate involvement in writing programs has been limited to tutoring in writing centers. This article examines the unique position of peer tutors within the writing program, reviews evidence of successful undergraduate participation in writing programs at the administrative and instructive levels, and calls on administrators to involve undergraduates in writing program research and assessment.

In this essay, I argue for the necessity of including peer tutor participation in writing program research and planning. I begin by reviewing the available literature to show the ways in which undergraduate participation in writing programs benefits all stakeholders and then argue for the peer tutor as the natural choice to break ground in this undergraduate administrative role. I then present results from my home institution's foray into utilizing peer tutors as researchers to create new knowledge about writing. Finally, I conclude by arguing that the results of my research and the student voices I shared with writing program administrators could only have been accessed by a peer tutor. In sum, this article urges writing programs to bring peer tutors out of writing centers and into a position to collaboratively create new initiatives and improve existing composition programs.

Argument

In my first year of writing center tutoring, I had a client who had been coming to the same tutor every week at the same time for several months. He was as distraught by her absence as I was nervous to live up to her reputation, and he asked me where she was as soon as we sat down. "She's presenting at the Mid-Atlantic Writing Center Association conference," I told him. The fact that some of our undergraduate peer tutors were doing research and presenting it at a multi-institutional conference was truly worthy of celebrating. Some tutors are happy just to help fellow students with their papers, which is the essence of our job description, but increasing numbers of tutors are redefining what it means to be an undergraduate working in a writing program. We see proof of the tutor as researcher when we see tutors presenting at writing center conferences and publishing in composition journals, such as the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, which has a "Tutor's Column" devoted to the research and reflection of these young scholars, and the *Writing Center Journal*, which is dedicating a forthcoming issue to tutor research. I believe that the research conducted by peer tutors is important not just to the tutor community, but to writing programs and their administrators because tutors stand at the intersection of several academic crossroads—student, teacher, writer, writing program ambassador, writing program beneficiary—and view a writing program's work in unique ways that reveal previously untapped information. This

information can only add to a writing program's self-knowledge and represents an alternative but useful method of assessment, one for which I urge writing program administrators to provide the opportunity and peer tutors to respond to the call.

Jeanne Marie Rose and Laurie Grobman tell us in their article "Scholarship Reconsidered: Tutor-Scholars as Undergraduate Researchers" that peer tutor scholarship is an extension of undergraduate research pedagogy and cite successful research projects that have developed out of a synthesis of undergraduate research initiatives and tutoring programs. When we turn to the composition literature, however, there is not much evidence of this undergraduate scholarship helping to shape the administrative vision in a similar manner. As a peer tutor at the University of Delaware writing center, I applaud my fellow tutors who publish and present their scholarship and appreciate the work done by scholars such as Rose and Grobman, which has enabled us to conduct this scholarship under the legitimized title of "researchers." It is not only other tutors who give notice to our work, but writing instructors and administrators in and out of the writing center who are interested in our ideas and approaches to peer tutoring. But I argue that it is time for peer tutor research to rise above the confines of the writing center—above techniques and tips and resources for tutoring sessions—and bring the tutor-researchers into their institutions' writing programs, where their experience and orientation as undergraduates bring a much-needed perspective and can thus be beneficial to all involved. Outside of the writing center, peer tutor participation in writing instruction, particularly in shaping the administrative vision of writing programs, is currently very limited, but some writing program administrators have made attempts to bring these overlooked voices into assessment and curriculum design roles.

Literature Review

Searching through composition literature reveals few examples of peer tutors participating in writing programs in a nontutoring capacity. Peggy O'Neill, Ellen Schendel, and Brian Huot's article "Defining Assessment as Research: Moving from Obligations to Opportunities" argues that assessment should be conducted through a research mindset and that only by conceptualizing assessment as research can writing programs "make knowledge about writing, writers, and the teaching of writing" (22). But in order to create this knowledge, all participants in a writing program have to be involved. O'Neill, Schendel, and Huot claim:

If we reconceive of writing assessment as an occasion for conversation, we can view assessment as an opportunity to know more about what the various stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators—think about writing instruction and assessment, enlarging the dialogue and expanding our understanding of how writing assessments impact the people who teach and learn in our programs. (20)

Peer tutors are not mentioned by O'Neill, Schendel, and Huot, which seems a strange omission in light of the fact that tutors are often the only writing program participants who meet all the criteria—who officially both teach *and* learn in writing programs. Peer tutors cannot be overlooked as stakeholders because of this double role. Writing programs are often charged with teaching tutors about writing in their mandatory composition classes and in their tutor preparation classes, so tutors are a demographic of students who take the highest numbers of courses developed by writing programs. Writing programs are also responsible for making sure that peer tutors and writing instructors are working with the same students towards the same writing goals,

thereby tying tutoring to what the instructors are teaching during class time. Because of this double relationship that tutors have with their writing programs, the next step in the “conversation” that writing programs are trying to create via their assessments is to involve peer tutors on a non-tutoring level in writing program research.

Tutors can and do successfully work in administrative roles when they are not conducting tutorials or talking with other tutors. For example, in the article “Bringing Students into the Loop: A Faculty Feedback Program,” Jacob Blumner, Francis Fritz, and Sarah Wice provide a rare example of peer tutor involvement in writing programs, albeit not on an assessment level. Rather, Blumner, Fritz, and Wice argue for peer tutor involvement in curriculum design, specifically in the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement. Their article explores the relationship that peer tutors might have with the WAC program by “tutoring” participating professors during the creation of writing assignments for their multidisciplinary courses. While this role keeps the tutors working in the writing center vein, or at least in the traditional tutor zone of influence, it does suggest that tutors can participate in writing programs in active, catalytic ways. Arguing that traditional “transmission” pedagogy is lacking in student involvement, Blumner, Fritz, and Wice claim:

Missing in this model is the recognition that college students bring years of educational experience to the classroom that is analogous to faculty professional experience. Unfortunately, the student knowledge base remains largely untapped. Faculty frequently overlook the possibility that students can offer potential solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Yet, beyond the teaching evaluation, faculty rarely ask students to explain how they understand the learning environment and how they might help faculty to improve the education process.

Such a summary of faculty-student relationships applies as much, if not more, to the assessment culture of the writing program as to the WAC program. The writing specialist–peer tutor relationships that are common in university writing programs seem ripe to remedy the exclusion of undergraduate voices from program development, specifically surrounding the processes of assessment.

So why peer tutors? Why do the undergraduate researchers that we bring into the writing program have to be peer tutors instead of other research-interested undergraduates? Admittedly, students lacking tutoring experience can still offer valuable perspectives on the writing program and access the opinions of their peers, but peer tutors are already participants in writing programs. Writing program administrators have trained us in their philosophies of writing and tutoring and helped us understand the pedagogies endorsed by our writing programs. We have tutored many, if not all, of the writing assignments given by writing program faculty. We have seen how writing program students write—and, more importantly, how their writing improves over time with instruction. If there is a change in the institutional status, pedagogy, leadership, or assessment of our writing programs, we are aware of it—possibly more aware than writing center directors and writing program administrators (WPAs) realize.

And yet, we are not teachers or administrators, allowing us to bring a new perspective to assessment work. Such a perspective is to be valued, as Laura Brady argues in “A Case for Writing Program Evaluation,” where she stresses the need for writing programs to involve outsiders in their assessment processes. She claims that outsiders bring an objective status and a

national perspective that can “inspire ideas for change or renewal” (79). I argue that peer tutors are a different and similarly valuable voice from outside the traditional power structure of writing programs. Just as bringing a national perspective into writing program assessment can produce informative results, bringing in a different local perspective can prove equally instructive. As peer tutors, we walk the line between being insiders and outsiders in writing program research and assessment—we are outside the administration, but we are very much inside the mechanics of how a writing program interacts with its institution. That is, when reading our position through a lens that juxtaposes Blumner, Fritz, and Wice’s argument with Brady’s, it becomes apparent that tutor-assessors are, paradoxically, insider-outsiders who are doubly authorized: we have been in the writing program as both student and guide, but we are not instructors, writing program administrators, graduate teaching assistants, or university officials. We are new—and until now, largely untapped—sources of assessment expertise and ideas.

The Study

Such at least was what we discovered at the University of Delaware. In the spring of 2010, my third semester of tutoring, my writing program received a grant to evaluate English 110, the mandatory freshman composition course for all students at the University of Delaware. This grant included funds for an undergraduate research assistant, and my WPA and mentor, Melissa Ianetta, offered me the position because she was familiar with my work in the writing center. I accepted the assistantship not fully aware of what I was getting myself into and thinking that my job would entail going to the library, making copies, and organizing writing program files from past assessment projects. Instead, my WPA asked me to conduct an assessment project of my own. While the larger English 110 assessment project focused on examining and assessing student writing directly, my assignment was to create and execute an indirect assessment that relied on communicating with the student body and evaluating to what degree former English 110 students felt the course had prepared them to write throughout the remainder of their undergraduate careers. The University of Delaware’s Institutional Review Board approved the larger assessment project, and this approval extended to my project, enabling me to interview students and share my data with administrators and scholars. While initially unsure of myself, I knew my position as an undergraduate would help me conduct this project, for I had taken English 110 only a few years before. I therefore was able to use my own experiences to form starting points for discussion. I could also talk to students on their level, rather than from the level of an administrator, so I was able to communicate with them as a fellow student instead of someone teaching or grading them. I believe that, because of this equality, I received a remarkable scope of participation—Dr. Ianetta asserted that the response rate was roughly five times greater than is our normal undergraduate survey response—and depth of participation; students were willing to open up and talk to me about issues that they had not brought up to their English 110 professors or on course evaluations.

The Survey

Because I wanted to represent the range of student experiences in English 110 as well as the depth of opinion in those experiences, I decided to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on how University of Delaware students felt the English 110 course prepared them for further college writing. The first part of my project consisted of creating a twenty-question survey using

Qualtrics survey software and getting the highest possible number of former English 110 students to complete it. The survey consisted of short answer, multiple choice, ranking, and yes/no questions, and took approximately ten minutes to complete. Questions on my survey focused on whether students' English 110 experiences met the writing program's objectives, reflected writing program goals for freshman writing, and met larger University of Delaware objectives. Part one of the survey gave students a 1-4 scale, with 4 being "strongly disagree," 3 being "somewhat disagree," 2 being "somewhat agree," and 1 being "strongly agree." Students were asked to use the scale to rate their agreement or disagreement with the idea that each of the writing program objectives for English 110 played a role in their actual course experience. Part two of the survey gave students a new 1-4 scale, with 4 being "This was not an objective of my English 110 class," 3 being "English 110 did not help me meet this objective," 2 being "English 110 somewhat helped me meet this objective," and 1 being "English 110 helped me meet this objective." Students were asked to use this scale to rate the degree to which they felt that English 110 had helped them achieve writing program objectives in the areas of critical reading, the writing process, rhetorical knowledge, and knowledge of conventions. Part three then took these four categories of objectives and asked students to rank the objectives within each category from "This was the most important objective in my English 110 class" to "This was the least important objective in my English 110 class." The final part of the survey asked students for any additional comments on their English 110 experiences.

While I have argued for the importance of involving undergraduates in writing program research, I realize that undergraduates cannot feasibly operate as researchers without collaboration and assistance from faculty and administrators. I created a survey, but I could not distribute it to the entire student body from my position as an undergraduate, so I had to turn to my mentor to disseminate the survey to my desired audience. She had access to university gatekeepers that I, as an undergraduate, lacked. With her help, I applied to the dean of arts and sciences for permission to send the undergraduate student population an email containing my introductory message and a link to my survey. Knowing how reluctant I personally would be to take a random survey that appeared in my inbox without invitation, I received permission from the writing program to offer survey respondents the opportunity to enter a drawing to win a \$50 Amazon.com gift certificate. All the respondents had to do was complete the survey, print the final page, and bring it to the writing center front desk. (This had the added benefit of forcing hundreds of students to find the writing center for the first time.) After one week, my survey closed with an impressive 1,766 respondents, which I conjecture stems from the fact that students were more willing to take a fellow student's survey than that of a faculty or staff member; they were helping out a peer rather than a paid employee.

Using Qualtrics, I was able to access the data from the ranking questions through tables and graphs that indicated percentages and averages. This presentation of the data made it immediately clear that the writing program scored highest on "Writing as a process that includes prewriting, drafting, review, and revision" and lowest on "Understanding how genres shape reading and writing." The optional prompt "Additional comments on your experiences with English 110" (which had no limit on how much students could write) could not be so easily broken down, and many students did take the time to respond to this section. I received many complaints about teachers, assigned readings, and numbers of required papers, but also constructive criticisms that became particularly interesting to me when they were repeated over and over again by students in differ-

ent sections and different academic years. These additional comments became the starting points for much of the discussion in the next part of my project.

With the exception of the questions asking for additional comments and four initial baseline questions (“When did you take English 110?” “Did you take English 110 as an Honors section?” “Did you take English 110 linked with English 101?” “Were you a first-year student when you took English 110?”), all of the questions on my survey came directly from the University of Delaware writing program’s mission statement and student learning outcomes for English 110. My focus when putting together the survey and choosing questions was centered around aligning my project with the larger English 110 assessment project simultaneously being conducted by the writing program’s administrators. Their assessment studied student writing with the aim of discerning how well the writing program was meeting its own objectives for English 110, while my project attempted to use student opinions towards the same purpose. So my choice of questions was shaped by the writing program’s stated objectives for English 110, and I did not use the survey to explore anything outside the realm of these objectives. Were I to repeat my study with the same goal of studying how well English 110 met the stated objectives, I would not change the questions that I asked on the survey. If, however, I were to conduct a more open-ended study, I would go beyond the stated objectives to gather more quantitative data about students’ overall satisfaction with English 110. I did, in fact, expand the parameters of what I wanted to learn when I moved towards the qualitative part of my study: conducting focus groups.

Focus Groups

My experience disseminating my survey shows that undergraduate researchers sometimes cannot successfully conduct their studies without the assistance of a faculty mentor, but there are times when the best research results come from working *without* the faculty member. The information from the survey was informative, and it shed light on student dissatisfactions with the writing program, but I was aware that general surveys have some severe limitations. Respondents are limited to choosing between preselected answers or given a comment box with no opportunity for dialogue between the commenter and the researcher, so I also wanted to talk to some students in small groups to ask them “Why?” and “Can you please explain further?” and “Did you have the same experience as he did?” After completing the general survey, students were taken to a page that asked if they would be interested in being part of a short, informal, well-fed focus group to continue discussing English 110’s relevance to their lives and academic careers. If they responded “yes,” students were asked to provide their email addresses so I could contact them. I decided to hold four focus groups, one for each academic year, omitting the freshmen who had yet to complete English 110. I created four spreadsheets with the contact information of the students who had provided their email addresses, and tried to be very scientific about whom I selected. I used a random number generator to find a starting student, and then divided my total number of possible students by the number of students I wanted (at that point, an ambitious eight) and counted down the spreadsheets by that number. I soon found that many students were no longer available at the time I had reserved a classroom for, and many had just responded to the interest-gauging page without reading it. I had to abandon the hope of sending randomly selected invitations and invited every student who had responded in the hopes that I would gather a complete focus group.

Even with these measures, the freshman group failed to produce enough volunteers, so I held

individual interviews with the two freshmen who had responded. The sophomore group was much better, and I had six volunteers in what would be my most engaging and talkative focus group. The junior and senior focus groups each had only four volunteers, but we managed to produce some interesting discussion amongst the five of us both times. As I was moderator of the focus groups and part of the conversation, I asked another tutor from the writing center to take notes for me so I would have a record of the discussions. The questions I started with were as follows:

- What were your perceptions of English 110 before taking it?
- What did you learn in English 110 that you had already learned in your high school?
- What was new information?
- What did you learn in English 110 that you were able to apply to your later courses at the University of Delaware?
- Did you use any citation styles beyond MLA?
- Did you use peer editing, and did you find it helpful?
- What could be done to make English 110 better?

I asked these questions as starting points, but I tried not to guide the students' answers. They gradually started to take control of the conversation and bring up things about English 110 that they really wanted on the table. They praised some things about their English 110 classes and expressed frustration about others. Many times they wanted to ask the other focus group members if their experiences had been similar, and in this way, they started talking to each other instead of me and building on each other's answers. Their answers repeatedly dictated tangential discussions, and sometimes new questions occurred to me.

Sometimes what the discussions revealed confirmed things I already knew from the survey. For example, students who attended high-performing high schools with strong English programs found English 110 easy and somewhat of a basic review, while students who came from lower-performing high schools found English 110 difficult and, at times, overwhelming. But sometimes new information came up; for example, it was my understanding that English 110 professors at least mentioned more than one citation style, but several students claimed not to have been aware that there were citation styles besides MLA until their majors required the use of them. Had a faculty member conducted the focus groups, instead of a fellow student, I suspect that students would have been much more reluctant to discuss areas where they felt the English 110 course fell short. After finishing my focus groups, I studied these candid student comments and coded my notes for the seven things that students brought up most: citation styles, the degree to which information was a review after high school, continuity within the English 110 program, themed English 110 classes, the desire to test out of English 110 (which University of Delaware students cannot do), the effectiveness of peer review, and teaching the course at different levels. The semester coming to a close, I then shared my internal findings with my WPA and presented them externally at the summer 2010 Council of Writing Program Administrators conference.

Conclusion

Holding focus groups helped me to learn things that the writing program could not detect in student writing samples or even from my general survey, and revealed both positives and negatives about how University of Delaware students view the efficacy of the English 110 course.

Having spent the past year reflecting on my project, I believe that my research experience, and the results that it yielded, would have been very different if I were not a peer tutor. As a student I was able to have candid discussions with other students about the English 110 course. English 110 usually gets overwhelmingly positive course reviews, but as my research proves, this is not an accurate reflection of how students view English 110. Because I was not in a position of authority and students were not afraid to offend me by saying anything negative about English 110 and the writing program, I received many students' opinions that reveal areas where the writing program could improve. Some of these areas are reflected in student writing samples and/or course evaluations, but many are not. I have brought these areas to the attention of the WPA and writing program instructors, and I believe that this contribution to my writing program is just as valuable as the work I do inside the writing center.

This project had value for me as well as the writing program. After struggling in the initial stages to understand my project's purpose in conjunction with the larger study, I learned that my purpose in asking questions, what I desired to learn from asking the questions I did, heavily influenced the answers I received. I limited my survey to only asking questions in line with the stated objectives of English 110 because I wanted to know how well students felt that the writing program was meeting those objectives, but it would have been a very different survey with questions such as those I asked in the focus groups. Had the survey asked students what they liked and disliked about English 110, and what they thought should be changed, hundreds of diverse responses would have poured in. It would have been much harder to quantify such open-ended data, and I still would not have been able to ask any follow-up questions; on the other hand, we would know more about how students perceived the effectiveness of English 110 through their own lenses, rather than only through the writing program's lens. There is merit to both methods of conducting the study, and future tutor-researchers must clearly consider their purposes in conducting research before settling on one method or the other. For the purposes of my study, I kept the survey very close to the stated objectives and then allowed the students to share their own perceptions in the focus groups.

When the focus groups ended, I organized and interpreted the data for my WPA, but she carried the analysis of the data further than I could by looking at it in conjunction with the data yielded by other assessment projects she was working on or had conducted in the past. I would have liked to play a more active role in the data analysis, but I felt that I would be overstepping some boundary if I offered anything more than suggestions to the administrators. It was a difficult line to walk as someone outside the traditional writing program power structure who is studying ways to make an element of the writing program better, but I seem to have walked it without stepping on any toes. I owe this to my WPA mentor, who was very clear about the purpose of my participation in assessment and honest about the ways in which I differed from a traditional assessor. This open communication between mentor and tutor-researcher is key to the tutor-researcher understanding the purpose of the project and the politics of the writing program, and having the most possible resources available to him or her during the research process.

I have been asked several times how this project influenced my tutoring, and I have to respond each time that being a tutor-researcher did not have an effect on my tutorials. I did not study anything that pertained to the fifty-minute sessions I conduct wherein my tutee and I have a conversation and revise his or her paper. I did become even more acquainted with student frustrations about English 110 and other writing courses, but it did not change the way I operate. My

study required me to leave the writing center, to “de-center” myself, and bring my skills to a different area, figuratively and physically, of the writing program. The project did, however, make me a better writing scholar. I became much more involved with the writing program and with faculty and administrators whom I previously had not known well. Talking to them made me much more interested in composition studies and gave me a start for my review of the available literature on the subject of undergraduate scholarship. I became more invested in research and academia, and I now have an insight into the life of a university academic that few undergraduates get. Based on my own experiences, I encourage WPAs and faculty to offer opportunities for undergraduate research in the writing program because this insight is a truly heady thing, and once explored at the undergraduate level, it can lead to increased loyalty to the writing program and the institution, perhaps even to graduate studies. Therefore I advise that administrators create a place for undergraduates at the assessment level, use undergraduate researchers to test the pulse of writing program students, trust that undergraduates can have valuable insights, communicate frequently and openly with undergraduate researchers about their projects, and occasionally rein in and refocus undergraduates who think that the sky is the limit when it comes to project scope. My advice for undergraduates interested in doing research in the writing program is the following: if no projects are available, ask that one be created, or ask to join a preexisting project; get involved in institutional outreach by communicating with other tutors; attend writing conferences and go to any session that sounds interesting; and keep up with tutor research being conducted around the country and published in journals like the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, the *Writing Center Journal*, and *Young Scholars in Writing*.

From project design to implementation to the sharing of my research at a scholarly conference, my experience with assessment answers Rose and Grobman’s call to place peer tutors in expanded scholarly roles. And while I am pleased that my work has contributed to the evolution of the University of Delaware writing program, the more important argument is that other peer tutors should work to create such opportunities for themselves. Such, I think, will be the case at my school, where many of my fellow writing center tutors have expressed interest in becoming more involved with our writing program and with tutor communities at different institutions. Peer tutors at other institutions need to realize our scholarly position in relation to writing programs and understand that our insider-outsider status gives us unique knowledge that can shape writing programs in ways that benefit our peers and future students. Writing program administrators can make it easier for peer tutors to step into research and assessment roles by incorporating the undergraduate perspective into their institutions’ pedagogies and by encouraging peer tutors to research and report on the gap between traditional forms of assessment and our fellow undergraduates’ experiences. I therefore call upon peer tutors to use their position to discover and develop new research, and I call upon writing program faculty to mentor these undergraduates, who have much to offer, so that tutors can bring their ideas and scholarship to bear.

Works Cited

- Blumner, Jacob, Francis Fritz, and Sarah Wice. “Bringing Students into the Loop: A Faculty Feedback Program.” *Across the Disciplines: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Language, Learning, and Academic Writing 4* (2007). Web. 13 Jan. 2011.
- Brady, Laura. “A Case for Writing Program Evaluation.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 28.1/2 (2004): 79–94. Web. 23 Dec. 2010.

“English 110—Critical Reading and Writing.” English Department. University of Delaware, n.d. Web. 11 Mar. 2010.

O’Neill, Peggy, Ellen Schendel, and Brian Huot. “Defining Assessment as Research: Moving from Obligations to Opportunities.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 26.1/2 (2002): 10–26. Web. 23 Dec. 2010.

Rose, Jeanne Marie, and Laurie Grobman. “Scholarship Reconsidered: Tutor-Scholars as Undergraduate Researchers.” *Writing Lab Newsletter* 34.8 (April 2010): 10-13. Web. 13 Jan. 2011.