

Apologia for Undergraduate Peer-tutors in Writing

Lawrence Cleary[†]

[†]Writing Consultant and Researcher for the Regional Writing Centre

University of Limerick

When Kenneth Bruffee said 'The beginnings of peer tutoring lie in practice, not in theory' (Bruffee 2001, p.206), he was pointing out that 'ancillary [writing support] programs staffed by professionals' weren't working. 'Students', claimed Bruffee, 'avoided them in droves' (Bruffee, 2001: p.206). Students were avoiding lots of things in droves. It was, after all, the sixties. Back then, peers tutoring one another in writing was the trialling of a hunch. 'Some of us guessed', Bruffee recounted, 'that students were refusing the help we were providing because it seemed to them merely an extension of the work, the expectations, and above all the social structure of traditional classroom learning' (Bruffee 2001, pp. 206-07). Through peer-tutoring, Bruffee reasoned that

[...] teachers could reach students by organising them to teach each other. Peer tutoring was a kind of collaborative learning. It did not seem to change what people learned', he said, 'but, rather, the social context in which they learned it. Peer tutoring made learning a two way street, since students work tended to improve when they got help from peer tutors and tutors learned from the students they helped and from the activity of tutoring itself. Peer tutoring harnessed the powerful educative force of peer influence that had been—and largely still is—ignored and hence wasted by traditional forms of education.

(Bruffee 2001, 207)

This is what Bruffee and his colleagues observed in the late sixties and throughout the seventies, and this is what we observe every day in our Writing Centre at the University of Limerick and in any other arena where peers read and respond as readers to each other's written work. In fact, it is this idea of reciprocity that forms one of the most compelling aspects of our justification for our Peer-tutoring in Writing module, AW4006, which is a prerequisite for undergraduates interested in tutoring in our centre, and may soon also be a requirement of postgraduate tutors as well, an idea currently under consideration.

URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[118](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[118)

As Bruffee (2001) himself observed, the success of the practice eventually reveals the method behind its apparent madness. Every day, for us at the Regional Writing Centre at UL, the tutoring relationship unfolds and reveals additional benefits. The dynamic can be messy and seemingly disorderly or it can be remarkably efficient. Talk between student writers can be interesting and informative or it can be eye-opening and transformative. Whatever it is and whatever shape it takes, the dynamic seems often to fulfil Theresa Lillis's notion of 'Dialogues of Participation' (2006).

Lillis, in 'Moving towards an "Academic Literacies" Pedagogy: Dialogues of Participation' (2006, p.33) asks: 'How can we as teachers ensure that student writers can participate in existing dominant practices in higher education, such as essayist writing, whilst allowing space for challenging conventions in a changing higher education context which is premised upon notions of diversity and inclusion?' One way of achieving this pedagogical goal, she suggested, 'is through a combination of different types of dialogue between student writer and tutor-reader. Such dialogues', claims Lillis (2006, p.33), 'can enable participation in dominant academic literacy practices as well as provide opportunities for challenging aspects of such practices.'

Peter O'Neill, with the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre when writing 'Using peer-writing fellows in British Universities: complexities and possibilities' (2008), refers to an on-going, if marginalised, discussion in many UK learning development and study support units about who should talk about writing in the UK.

Talk around and about writing needs to be an important aspect of any...response to student writing. But what form will that talk take and who will conduct it? We need to make sure that those responsible for the limited talk around writing which currently exists...do not assume that their talk must be the best or only talk available to students.

(O'Neill, 2008)

O'Neill refers to the Academic Literacies movement, from which Theresa Lillis emanates, as 'the richest outcome of that discussion'. American audiences, he asserts, would not be surprised by Lillis's conclusions about the enabling qualities of student-writer/tutor-reader dialogues. 'Dialogue around writing has long been a key element in writing classes [in the US]', O'Neill reminds us, 'and, more explicitly, in the work that goes on in the writing centres and in the peer tutoring that forms an important part of Writing Fellows schemes' (O'Neill 2008).

O'Neill is responding to a British context, of course, and is looking at the recommendations of the Royal Literary Fund (RLF) members in *Writing Matters: The Royal Literary Fund report on student writing in higher education* (Davies, Swinburn and Williams 2006) and the three UK authors in Devet (the American), Orr, Blythman and Celia's 'Peering across the Pond: The role of students in developing other students' writing in the US and UK' (2006). In his article, O'Neill laments British resistance to two features of a US writing development model for third-level students—namely, writing fellows schemes and undergraduate peer tutors—and argues that British scepticism is unfounded.

In 'Peering across the Pond', Orr, Blythman and Celia respond to Devet's celebration of 'the pedagogy of peer influence' and of process theories of composition. Speaking of the *talk* that is not only typical of writing centre activity, but natural to study groups and dorm-room gossip, Bonnie Devet, writing instructor and Director of the Writing Lab in the College of Charelston, South Carolina, defends the value inherent in the practice:

Such talk leading to negotiated meanings implies that education does not always have to be based on a banking model where professors make deposits as students move through the system. Knowledge is not just 'out there', ready to be retrieved (Freire, 1970). Instead, knowledge is 'an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers and...learning is a social process not an individual one' (Bruffee, 1984). Knowledge and reality are seen 'as mediated or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as, in short, the product of *collaboration*' (Lunsford, 1991, p. 110). Thus, at the heart of the pedagogy of peer-group influence is another theory of learning—collaboration.

(Devet, et al. 2006, pp.198-99)

For Devet, and many others who embrace this pedagogy of peer influence, peers, 'serv[ing] as "true" readers of papers'..., promote an awareness of the choices available to student-writers when choosing topics, angles on, and approaches to, assignments, word-choices and phrasing, how they order their ideas, the tone they adopt, etc. Peer-learning 'offer[s] an alternative way of learning', says Devet, students 'engaging in a process in which students discover and write the paper that they want to write' (Devet, et al. 2006, p.200), as opposed to the one they thought they were required to write.

In the same article, Devet's UK counterparts, Orr, Blythman and Bishop, replied with a scepticism that offended O'Neill's sensibilities, lodging objections which he regarded as unfounded. The three were sceptical that undergraduates were up to the task. '[S]tudents have recent college experience,' they said, 'but most do not have the "breadth" of experiences that

lecturers say they draw on to support their students'(Devet, et al. 2006, p.209). This was a thought that was shared by the authors of the RLF report. Undergraduate tutors might see themselves as better, it was proposed, than those they tutor (Devet, et al. 2006, p.210, 211), the implication being, I suppose, that this would put the advertised benefits of the peer relationship into question. Of course, those benefits are set further into relief by the implications about the likely predominantly 'middle-class monolingual...make up [of] the majority of peer tutors' (O'Neill, 2008). Finally, suggestion was made that the tutors' non-invasive, non-directive, approach may be interpreted by those with less social capital as the 'withholding [of] insider information' (Devet, et al. 2006, p.210).

Some of the features of the UK context may have resonance with the Irish context, but Ireland is not the UK. There are differences. Without going beyond the scope of this article, and without addressing issues that I do not fully understand myself, let me just say that we would be remiss not to recognize that there are forces unique to the Irish context that determine who talks about writing in Higher Education institutes. In my presentation on this subject at the 10th Galway Symposium on Higher Education, 'The Written Word', I alluded to tribal politics, Monastic Order and the effects of colonialism on social hierarchies, on what constitutes knowledge and in determining who talks. A good example in law would be the High Court ruling in *David Hall v Ireland* that some talk from citizens is not sanctioned. The ruling stated, if I correctly understand it, that Hall hadn't the *locus standi* (O'Connor 2013) to challenge the Executive on behalf of the *Oireachtas*. The *Oireachtas* must speak for itself. There is a clear procedure that precludes any active, participatory role for 'citizens'. I thought this was a good demonstration of what I mean by powerful influences, usually institutional in nature. In light of this probably overly simplistic analogy, one would have to ask what powers lead to the devaluation of undergraduate talk about writing. Who possesses *locus standi* to talk about writing in third-level institutes, and why them and not others. This is something that has to be teased out, and is, as I said, beyond the scope of this address.

But one claim that I have heard from individuals in my own institution is the claim that undergraduates do not have the expertise, the knowledge and experience needed, to tutor postgraduates or staff, and the truth is that, more often than not, the undergraduates themselves are frightened by the prospect and ask if we can reschedule the postgraduate or staff writer to another, more experienced tutor. And we do. We respect their fear. But a part of us knows that they are fully capable of conducting a productive session with anyone who comes through our doors. We know this because we have seen their writing and know that they write well. We know this because we have talked to them about their writing and writing in general and know that they are good writers, reflective of their process, and we know this because they have completed our fully accredited module, AW4006, Peer-tutoring in Writing, with a B1 or better. 'The long run success of a peer-tutoring program', research tells us, 'depends a good deal on how the tutors are trained' (Beck et al. 1978: 433). These tutors are probably better prepared to tutor other writers than any of our postgraduate tutors because they have precisely the knowledge and experience needed to direct their peer's talk about their

papers.

Ryan and Zimmerelli's *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (2010) and Ebest, Alred, Brushaw and Oliu's *Writing from A to Z* writing handbook (2005) serving as core texts in that peer-tutoring in writing module, our undergraduate tutors are well versed in getting their peers talking about the context into which they write. That is a key notion: that our tutors are not talking about the other student's paper; they are asking questions that require the student-writer to talk about the paper they have come to talk about, that, for the student-writer, is the subject of the session. I mention the two texts because it is through Ryan and Zimmerelli's *Guide* that our peer tutors learn that the subject of the session is not the paper at all, but that it is the writer. They also learn that their experience of writing serves as a heuristic. When all else fails, a tutor asks themselves, 'What would I do in this writing situation?' It is a reasonable question to ask. Our tutors are good writers first and foremost, which means that they usually make good decisions and devise workable writing strategies for reaching their writing goals. It is this reflective process that allows our tutors to inquire into whether a particular strategy might be appropriate for the tutee who may have less experience to draw from or who, like a deer in headlights, is unable to see the options available to them.

Through the *Handbook* of Ebest et al. (2005), our tutors acquire a taste for an ancient technique from classical rhetoric: a way of assessing the context into which they write, the rhetorical situation. 'A good way to think about the rhetorical situation', say Crowley and Hawhee in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (2004, p.38), is to consider the figure of *Kairos*, the personification of opportunity, timely action. '[T]he rhetor is much like Kairos', say Crowley and Hawhee (2004, p.38), 'bearing many different tools. Not just anybody can balance precariously on a stick while displaying a set of scales on a razor blade in one hand and depressing the pan with the other; such balance takes practice'. Perhaps this description of *Kairos* represents an appropriate metaphor for writing, with so many elements to balance, but acting while the time is right, while the topic is still relevant.

Ebest et al.'s *Handbook* represents an analysis of the rhetorical situation as something that occurs early in the writing process. In fact, it is represented as either the first stage of the process or as something that precedes it. Like the *thesis statement*, the analysis of the context into which one writes is something that our tutors encourage their peers to return to throughout the writing process. As Crowley and Hawhee (2004, p.38) point out, the 'winged back and feet [of *Kairos*] suggest the fleeting nature of time and situations.' Situations develop. If one does not act quickly, the relevance of what one wishes to say is passed.

Ebest et al. (2005: 6) give us five aspects of the rhetorical situation to consider: the occasion for writing, the audience, the topic of the paper, the purpose for writing and the writer herself. All of these are important to the writer. Her writing choices are informed by the aspects of each

of these elements of the rhetorical situation that she explores. For the tutor, the writer is the most important element to consider. The tutor will ask the student-writer questions about the other elements, but the tutor's most important job is to draw the student-writer's attention to what she does, the decisions she makes based on what she knows, what she thinks, what she feels and on the extent to which she externalises her experience of writing (in general and in particular).

When one of our tutors talks to a person who has booked a session with him or her, the tutor listens to the writer talk about what is wrong with the paper, what is frustrating her or eluding her, what is working and what is not. The tutor is learning about the writer, her perceptions of what is important, how she approaches a paper, the strategies she has tried in her effort to meet her writing goals. Our tutors ask, 'What is the paper about?' (Does the writer have a clear idea of what the paper is about?) The tutor might ask, 'What do you want this paper to do?' It is amazing how often students who avail of our service are stymied by that question. 'What do you mean?' The manner in which they answer that question, once they understand what our tutor is driving at, is telling. A recent longitudinal study by the Harvard Writing Programs' Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz inquired into why some undergraduate writers develop apace while others' flounder. They discovered two things that distinguished the student writers that flourish from those who don't: firstly, good writers, they tell us, 'initially accept their status as novices' and, secondly, they 'see in writing a larger purpose than fulfilling an assignment' (2004: 124). 'The story of freshman year is not one of dramatic changes on paper', they conclude; 'it is the story of changes within the writers themselves' (2004: 124).

Our peer-tutors don't need to know how to write their charges' papers; the questions they ask their charges are the tools that struggling writers need to ask themselves if they are to develop as writers. Our undergraduate tutors are not in the business of giving answers, but of encouraging struggling writers to ask the questions that will lead to better writing and that will better facilitate their participation in the conversations of humankind. All else aside,

... no sense of the reality of peer-tutoring is possible without referring to the advantages of using undergraduates to play the part of an audience, provide an alternative way to learn, set up the talk, and establish a nurturing environment. (Devet 2006, p.200)

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