

Writing Mentors and the Writing Centre: producing integrated disciplinary writers

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Context

This article reports on an evaluation of the first year of the Student Writing Mentor Scheme, a peer tutoring initiative developed by the *Write Now* Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) (see <http://www.writenow.ac.uk> for details). The *Write Now* CETL aims to enrich students' learning experiences through the development of innovative, evidence-based provision focused on writing for assessment. It celebrates and promotes student writing in the disciplines, enabling students to develop academic and disciplinary identities as empowered, confident writers.

At London Metropolitan University (LondonMet), these aims are channelled through the work of the CETL-funded University Writing Centre, which opened in October 2006, and has since become the visible face of '*Write Now*' for university students and staff. The work of the Centre is wide-ranging, encompassing staff development in curriculum design; using learning technologies to support writing development; and a programme of tutorials, workshops and writing projects developed with and for students. The focus here is the *Student Writing Mentor Scheme (SWMS)*, an innovative, peer-led tutorial programme central to our student-facing operations.

From its inception, the Writing Centre has sought to complement existing writing support services for students and staff; and to position its work within the national context of student writing development by introducing and evaluating new, evidence-based approaches. Peer-assisted study support is now an aspect of many UK students' university experiences (Falchikov, 2001). At LondonMet there is an extensive Peer-Assisted Study Scheme (PASS) [1].

However, The *Write Now* SWMS is most influenced by the North American writing instruction tradition, where writing centres train students to work with peers in

collaborative and non-directive one-to-one tutorials on all aspects of their writing. Such an approach to writing support remains rare in the UK [2]. Where one-to-one support is provided, it is usually conducted by learning development tutors (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006), and more recently by Royal Literary Fund Fellows (Davies et al, 2006).

Rationale

The theoretical rationale for such a scheme lies in the profound connection between thinking and writing. Arguably, writing is thinking and student writing problems are often the result of a lack of clear thinking. This close connection between writing and thinking was formulated by Bruffee, building upon Vygotsky's insight that reflective thinking emerges out of the internalisation of public or social conversation:

'If thought is internalised public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalised social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalised conversation, then writing is internalised conversation re-externalised.'
(1984, p.641)

It follows that engaging students in constructive conversation about their ideas and their writing is likely to lead to better thinking and therefore to better writing. The SMWS offers a large-scale attempt to make such conversations available to LondonMet students.

The importance of conversation around writing is reinforced by Academic Literacies (AL) theorists, who stress that confusion around writing is often the result of a mismatch in the epistemological and disciplinary positions of lecturers and students (Lea & Street, 1998; Ivanič & Lea, 2006; Lillis, 2006).

Lillis argues that an effective response to this mismatch is likely to involve increased dialogue around writing – dialogues which will *'...enable participation in dominant academic literacy practices as well as provide opportunities for challenging aspects of such practices'* (p.33).

Building on the AL approach, Wingate has recently argued that writing support should not consist of stand-alone 'skills' lectures or workshops. Rather, real understanding of the complexities of disciplinary writing *'...can only be achieved within the subject and through explanations, modelling and feedback by subject tutors'* (2006, p.463).

Write Now's hypothesis is that students who are themselves engaged with understanding the complexities of their disciplinary discourse may also have a role to play in helping other students. Moreover, they are close enough to their peers to recognise co-students' confusions and perspectives which may not be as apparent to a tutor who has thoroughly internalised the epistemology of her/his discipline.

The use of Writing Mentors in the context of UK HE is not without potential controversy. For example, UK-based learning development lecturers have recently warned against assuming that peer writing tutorials are appropriate in a UK context, suggesting that student mentors might not be effective because they lack life experience, see themselves as superior to those they tutor and are likely to be ‘middle-class, monolingual students’ (Devet et al, p.210). Concerns such as these highlight the need for greater research.

Methodology

In the first year of operation (2006-07), 400 students participated in the SWM Scheme. In total, 675 hour-long tutorials were conducted by a team of eleven Student Mentors (of which one was postgraduate). After each one, students and mentors were asked to provide written feedback. This article provides a summary analysis of mentors’ comments; whilst analysis of students’ comments is ongoing (*please contact authors for further information*).

Mentors were given the prompt: ‘Please reflect on your session. (e.g. How do you feel you were able to help the student? What could have gone better?)’.

A thematic analysis of all comments was conducted. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003) was used to code and group the text into themes, and researchers’ interpretations were controlled and validated through comparison of independent readings.

Findings

This paper presents a summary of the key findings resulting from the thematic analysis. Four main themes and related sub-themes emerged, as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Thematic overview of Writing Mentors’ comments (2006-07)

Main theme	Sub-themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a rapport • Encouragement/emotional support • Setting expectations • Non-directive enabling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student’s relationship to own writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence/anxiety • Finding own voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and mentor working together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating/writing together • Informal talk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor self-reflections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges • Satisfaction

Theme one: Interpersonal relationship between student and mentor

From the mentors' perspective, the nature of their interactions with students was characterised by attention to emotional and psychological aspects of writing faced by students as well as by the need to explicitly shape students' expectations of the tutorials and the kind of writing support mentors are trained and able to offer. Helping students address their anxieties about academic writing was a common feature of tutorials. E.g:

'By the time our session had finished, Anisha looked much more confident and was able to discuss the essay without her anxiety levels increasing. A lot of the session was directed towards overcoming this anxiety.'

Equally common was the attention mentors gave to explicitly defining and modelling the non-directive, enabling nature of their role, and to facilitating students' understanding of the benefits of this way of working together.

'They seemed very keen to have me provide a template for them to adopt, and I was very careful to stress that I would not do this.'

'She still looks for guidance but I continue to turn it around and ask her.'

'My contribution seemed to be simply to help her regain a perspective from which it was possible for her to improve her work.'

The analysis did reveal some exceptions to this model of working. However, they can be isolated to specific tutorials, albeit only <5% of the total delivered. It requires acknowledging that, in a few cases, interaction with the mentor does not seem to have been characterised by a non-directive approach, as this comment illustrates: *'took everything I said to him and acknowledged mistakes'*. Such exceptions have been used in the following year's training for new mentors in order to stress the need for a non-directive learning environment.

Theme two: Student's relationship to own writing

The way students felt about their own writing contributed substantially to the shape of the tutorials. The mentors responded to students' individual experiences of anxiety and confidence, as well as provided a non-judgemental space for students to find their own voices within the parameters of their academic disciplines.

'The writer felt timid, and was taking refuge in over-long sentences, generalisations and pseudo-technical language. ...she said that this was a consequence both of feeling slightly nervous about the strength of her theoretical understanding and a lingering suspicion that good disciplinary writing needed to include jargon.'

The student's comment on the same tutorial suggests that the mentor's attempt to help the student find her own voice was successful: *'The session was very helpful. The mentor helped me to find a different way to express myself in writing.'*

Theme three: Student and mentor working together

Underpinned by the principle of non-directive collaboration, mentors engaged students in a number of hands-on writing activities, including free-writing and mind mapping, and simultaneously created a supportive, informal environment for students to speak about their writing. The one-hour duration of the tutorials made this working together possible.

We played a game where I asked her to summarise in one paragraph what she would consider to be the ideal main message of her essay. Without much help from me, she was then able to develop this into a substantial conclusion.

'This was an enjoyable session with a student who just needed some time and space to sit down and start discussing her essay away from the pressures of her life outside university.'

Analysis revealed that the mentors worked primarily not as subject experts but as encouraging peers who aimed to meet students wherever they were in their own writing process and to facilitate their development to the next step. This often involved working with students before they had done any writing for a particular assignment, or even before they had a sense of what they wanted to write or how to go about it. Such 'blank-slate' situations were used as opportunities to set the writing and thinking process in motion, often through free-writing and informal talk, to be taken forward by the student following the tutorial.

A small number of exceptions were again encountered:

'He did not have anything prepared. He was fairly difficult because not only could he not explain the essay title, he also couldn't collaborate on it since he did not have enough knowledge.'

These exceptions to the model have also been used in subsequent mentor training sessions.

Theme Four: Mentor self-reflections

The mentors additionally revealed their own thoughts about their work, which was characterised by some challenges and disappointments, but also by a high degree of satisfaction. Many reflected on the difficulties involved in confronting students' expectations that are at variance with the non-directive, collaborative nature of the tutorials:

'I don't think it went that well. The student came in assuming I know everything about counselling psychology, which I didn't. ... When I said I didn't know, she looked shocked and then started talking as if I didn't know anything.'

All of the mentors, however, expressed real satisfaction gained from being a part of the process of helping fellow students evolve as academic writers, e.g:

'Jon has progressed since he first came to the centre; he is no longer paralysed by uncertainty and seems well able to just express himself. He seems especially confident in using research material to build an argument and clearly finds conducting research highly enjoyable. It's so nice to see!'

Conclusion and Implications

The initial phase of our research into the SMW Scheme at LondonMet suggests that, when trained as Writing Mentors, students are able to facilitate the kind of dialogue around writing that can help peers develop into more confident and competent academic writers.

Mentors were able to draw on their own experiences of participating in AL practices, creating a supportive space in which students are encouraged to find their own academic voices and become participants in their own disciplinary communities.

Although further research is needed, for example on students' experiences of the SMWS and on the relationship of the Scheme to student achievement, research so far suggests that appropriately trained students have a valuable and under-acknowledged role to play in facilitating the academic writing development of other students in UK HE. Based on our experiences of the Scheme at LondonMet, we suggest that the use of student writing mentors would provide an effective and pedagogically sound addition to existing writing support services for students in other institutions.

Notes

[1] See also Boud et al. (2001) which looks at peer learning in the Australian context.

[2] Two major exceptions are the Writing Centre at St Mary's University College in Belfast which employs undergraduate Peer Tutors (<http://www.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk/writingcentre>) and the Writing and Learning Mentors scheme at University College London which is staffed by postgraduate Mentors (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/calt/acp/wlm.htm>). Write Now has also implemented Student Writing Mentor Schemes at its collaborating institutions, Liverpool Hope and Aston Universities.

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