Becoming Peer Tutors of Writing: Identity Development as a Mode of Preparation

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Writing teacher education typically focuses on preparing pre-service English teachers for work in K-12 classrooms. Preparation programs directed at teacher candidates presuppose two important factors: one, participants in a writing teacher education program plan on becoming teachers after they graduate; and two, participants have a desire to attend these programs because they will be able to teach composition courses as part of their graduate curriculum, while undergraduate students may seek positions as writing tutors in order to work on campus. Moreover, the motivation for participation in preparation programs may vary greatly within this subset, as some participants may attend only those professional development opportunities that are mandated by a supervising body, while others may choose to attend all available modes of preparation. Taking a closer look at the various modes by which these instruction and tutoring roles are identified, we can observe that the identification of a role is consciously constructed and temporarily employed. While an identity is discussed in their training manuals. As noted above, this may force the tutors to play the role of tutor during a tutorial, rather than to promote in a preparation mode that does not include a focus on developing a tutor identity. Instead, new tutors are discouraged from adopting an evaluative role of editor or assessor, and instead to become what Harris (1992) observed as “hybrid[s], somewhere between a peer and a teacher, who cannot lean too much one way or the other” (380). However, by focusing on the transitory roles that tutors should or should not play in a tutorial, tutors are prevented from conceptualizing what it actually means to be a tutor, and consequently the identity they must construct to become one. If peer tutors fail to develop a tutor identity during their preparation programs, they may instead rely on playing roles that are not appropriate for the space of the tutorial. Introducing the K-2 concept of teacher identity to the preparation of undergraduate peer tutors of writing may provide new tutors with the tools necessary to develop tutor identities. Using data collected through case studies of first-time tutors, I argue that when preparation programs focus on aspects of teacher identity, new tutors are better prepared to assume the professional identity of a writing tutor and less likely to play roles that are not conducive to the philosophy of writing centers. In other words, participants will see themselves as tutors beyond the constraints of the tutorial.

Theoretical Context

Preparation programs are most effective when they are developed on a local level, using available resources to meet the specific needs of the local population (Smith and Bath, 2004). Depending on the effective availability of resources (for example, time, money, and staff) at that level, preparation programs may vary greatly on the large body of “training” literature. Teaching literature typically consists of tutor manuals, which articulate the practical aspects of tutoring, and anthologies of foundational articles in the writing center discourse. Tutor manuals (or handbooks) outline and/or promote tutor behaviors that are reflective of the “best practices” of tutoring in written. The present study, the best practices for tutoring composition at the college level reflect a social constructivist philosophy in which the student is placed at the center of the learning experience, and that are consistent with the larger writing center discourse (Murphy, 1994; Hobson, 1992). However, these best practices are not always explicitly couched in the relevant theoretical underpinnings. For example, in chapter three of the Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors, “Inside the Tutoring Session,” Ryan and Zimmerman (2005) encourage tutors to be “open” and “sensitive” in order to effectively engage students in the writing tutorial. They write: “introduce yourself,” “sit side-by-side,” “give the student control of the paper,” and “keep resources and tools nearby” (18). These suggestions are consistent with the best practices of tutoring in the writing center community. However, if these types of behaviors are promoted in a preparation mode that does not include a focus on developing a tutor identity, tutors may be left with a set of prescribed actions, and without a complex understanding of how to employ them when they encounter situations or experiences outside of those discussed in their training manuals. As noted above, this may force the tutors to play the role of tutor during a tutorial, rather than to actually develop the identity of a writing tutor. The distinction between these two terms, “identity” and “role,” lies in the level of awareness an individual maintains over identifiable behavioral characteristics. The characteristics of one’s identity are an unconscious representation of his/her natural behaviors. In contrast, the identifiable characteristics of a role are consciously constructed and typically employed temporarily. While an identity reflects an individual’s complete commitment to a set of characteristics, a role reflects a lower level of commitment to them. This why an individual can be said to be “playing a role,” and not “playing an identity.” Identity construction is facilitated through exposure to the models (Wortham, 2006) and discourse (Bennwell and Stokoe, 2006) of an identity. With this dual exposure, individuals can choose to construct a hybrid identity that reflects both the characteristics of the larger identity model and the characteristics of the tutor identity model. A deeper understanding of the concept of teacher identity may assist writing center directors in promoting the construction of tutor identities amongst the participants of their preparation programs. Research from K-12 teacher education programs suggests preparation programs would greatly benefit from an additional focus on developing a tutor identity within the course of the preparation programs (Alsup, 2006; Danielewicz, 2001). Teacher identity research in teacher education programs indicates that participants who are prepared to assume the program-appropriate identity will have a strong affiliation to their positions and more effective pedagogical practices (Alsup, 2006; Danielewicz, 2001; McKinney et al., 2008).

As evidenced in the literature, the preparation of undergraduate peer tutors for work in university writing centers regularly includes focus on roles tutors should avoid adopting in the tutorial (Trimbur, 1987; Thomus, 2003). New tutors are discouraged from adopting an evaluative role of editor or assessor, and instead to become what Harris (1992) observed as “hybrid[s], somewhere between a peer and a teacher, who cannot lean too much one way or the other” (380). However, by focusing on the transitory roles that tutors should or should not play in a tutorial, tutors are prevented from conceptualizing what it actually means to be a tutor, and consequently the identity they must construct to become one. If peer tutors fail to develop a tutor identity during their preparation programs, they may instead rely on playing roles that are not appropriate for the space of the tutorial. Introducing the K-2 concept of teacher identity to the preparation of undergraduate peer tutors of writing may provide new tutors with the tools necessary to develop tutor identities. Using data collected through case studies of first-time tutors, I argue that when preparation programs focus on aspects of teacher identity, new tutors are better prepared to assume the professional identity of a writing tutor and less likely to play roles that are not conducive to the philosophy of writing centers. In other words, participants will see themselves as tutors beyond the constraints of the tutorial.

A meta-analysis of teacher identity research, I isolated four identity characteristics that regularly appeared in descriptions of teachers with strongly developed teacher identities. These four traits function as the stable, unconscious behavior characteristics of a strong teacher identity. New tutors are able to develop several of the stable, unconscious behavior characteristics of a strong teacher identity, they will be better prepared to translate these behaviors into the construction of their own tutor identity.

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at the time of the study. Annie and Suzie were trained in the course and the workshop, while Melissa and Robert were trained solely by the CRC Writing Lab. Both the tutors completed all assignments and demonstrated a strong understanding of the tutoring process in their written responses to questions about the tutoring process. However, Robert’s tutorial behaviors were consistent with the values of an effective tutor as modeled by the workshop leader. His attempt to establish an agenda by discussing the tutor’s goals for the tutorial was ineffective because he did not consult the handbook or provide the tutee with direction about what to expect during the tutorial.

Melissa also displayed evidence of a strong understanding of the tutoring process. She was able to build a relationship with her tutees, engage in a conversation about their goals, and provide feedback that was helpful and useful. However, she also displayed evidence of not possessing a strong understanding of the source material. Melissa’s attempts to establish an agenda by discussing the tutor’s goals for the tutorial were ineffective because she did not consult the handbook or provide the tutee with direction about what to expect during the tutorial.

The results of this study are consistent with previous research that has found that new tutors often lack the skills necessary for effective tutoring. This study also highlights the need for more research on the types of support that can help new tutors develop these skills. Future research should focus on identifying the types of support that are most effective for helping new tutors develop their skills.
Similarly, Melissa displayed an inflexible understanding of academic prose, which also prevented her from providing tutors with multiple tools for creatively developing their assignments. Because of her inflexibility, she modeled academic language to her tutees more than any other tutor in the present study. In an interaction between Melissa and her tutee, who was struggling with the weak and the final part of assignment, Melissa attempted to convince her tutee that there were many ways of circumventing this restriction: “So, what you are really saying inside is, ‘I think this is right,’ but you can’t say ‘I think you say something like’ ‘It is important that blah, blah, blah.’ Or that ‘Ash is correct when he says blah, blah, blah.’” In this exchange, Melissa, as a college senior, modeled academic language that her tutee, as a freshman, will be responsible for mastering in her college career. However, Melissa really only modeled one type of discourse in a way that left no space for viable alternatives, such as encouraging the tutee to couch her analysis of the text within a larger on-going conversation.

Because of their exposure to multiple models of tutor identities in the preparation course, Annie and Suzie did not employ one specific approach to the tutoring process (as opposed to Melissa and Robert who required their tutees to read each draft out loud while they made comments). For example, in a challenging tutorial Suzie allowed the tutee to dictate the terms of the tutorial. Suzie had trouble establishing a high level of rapport with this tutee who appeared reticent to participate in the tutorial. Unusually, the tutee’s draft was entirely in a bulleted list format, yet Suzie did not let the tutee’s attitude or uniquely organized draft influence the productivity of the tutorial. When Suzie asked the tutee to freewrite from a recently-seen scrap paper as a step in the process of completing a draft, the tutee chose to engage in the work without Suzie’s assistance, which was not what she had anticipated. Even though Suzie laid the groundwork for an activity to collectively clarify the tutee’s main argument, the tutee chose to engage in this activity alone. Suzie allowed the tutee to space to develop her ideas as she saw fit and did not require her to interact in a specific manner. Because of the unusual format of the tutee’s draft, there was no pressure on the tutee to participate in order to support through her typical behaviors. Instead, she relied on asking questions as a means to effectively communicate with the tutee. Her flexibility in this tutorial demonstrated that Suzie was clearly committed to working with the tutee to foster an effective learning environment in whatever manner that was most meaningful to the tutee. The tutee expressed gratitude for Suzie’s assistance, and was visibly reassured when Suzie congratulated her for bringing in her draft well before the due date.

Annie regularly displayed evidence of flexibility in her tutorials in her tutoring behaviors and choice of activities. For example, Annie was the only tutor in this case who showed evidence of purposefully not engaging the tutee in a continual conversation. While discussing the “interesting” aspects of Stanley Milgram’s famous experiment with a tutee, Annie chose not to comment on the tutor’s suggestions, which would normally be explored in each session. When the tutee sat silently and actually considered the validity of her suggestion, Annie’s response reflected her flexible approach to tutoring; she later explained that she was not silent to punish the tutee, but rather to allow her the space to develop her critical thinking skills. Similarly, Annie was the only tutor to employ directed freewriting as a method of focusing, which again demonstrated her flexible approach to the work done in a tutorial. The Writing 60 instructor identified freewriting as a technique to employ in challenging tutorials, and regularly modeled it for the students by engaging in the practice in almost every course meeting. After Annie and her tutee discussed possible aspects of Milgram’s experiment that the tutee could develop into an argument, Annie asked the tutee to freewrite for the last five minutes of the tutorial. Annie explained that she regularly asked her tutees to freewrite for different reasons. It ensured the tutee “walks away with something written and tangible to go back to because, you know, the hardest part for a tutee in any session is remembering what you said.” Annie’s flexible tutoring in the reflective her well-developed tutor identity and her strong commitment to student learning.

Engagement with Reflective Practices

Participation in the present study gave Melissa an opportunity to reflect on her practices. She observed: “At our last interview, all of the questions you asked really made me reflect a lot...[about] what I had gained from the [one-day workshop] training and how I had just improved.” Melissa’s observation indicated that reflecting on her preparation allowed her to delineate between the information she acquired in the workshop and her own instincts which she regularly relied on. As in the other areas of tutor identity development, Melissa failed to fully engage in what Danielewicz (2001) would call “reflective” behavior. Melissa took time to think about her work in the Writing Lab in order to observe how far she had come, rather than complicating her practice as a means to improve it.

Participation in the present study also gave Annie and Suzie opportunities to reflect on their tutoring behaviors. In their second interviews, both tutors indicated that their participation in the study had given them the opportunity to reflect on their work as tutors, in the same way they reflected on their assignments in the preparation course. Annie and Suzie engaged in extensive self-reflective discussions which were modeled for them throughout their preparation. Therefore, both tutors regularly engaged in reflective activity because it was part of their tutor identities. For example, Suzie regularly reflected on her tutorials as a means to improve their tutoring practices which was a technique modeled in the Writing 60 course. Suzie believed that learning reflective processes was one of most effective outcomes of the Writing 60 course. However, I would argue that learning these methodologies of tutoring, as well as the tutors’ development as writers, were both integral components in developing her understanding of tutoring: she saw herself as a peer tutor in a community of tutors. However, Melissa did not demonstrate any evidence that she felt part of a larger discourse community of peer tutors. And while this was not a desired outcome of the CRC preparation program, exposure to discourse is necessary in the development of strong identities. Melissa’s belief in her membership in a localized community of tutors reinforced her ability to develop a slightly stronger tutor identity than Robert who showed no evidence of membership in a local community of tutors or a larger field of discourse.

Although neither Suzie nor Annie displayed overt evidence of possessing membership in the community of CRC tutors, both tutors did feel affiliations with the larger community of writing center professionals. Suzie regularly referenced the course materials in the language of the discourse community. Again, even though neither tutor made explicit declarations as such, both tutors functioned as members of a local and national community of tutors. Their exposure to multiple methodologies of tutoring, as well as writing center and educational discourses allowed Annie and Suzie to develop their identities within a community.

Discussion

The data from this study suggest that the writing tutors prepared by the workshop had not yet begun to develop their professional identities while the tutors prepared by both the workshop and the course might be beginning to develop more complex tutor identities. As novice tutors, all four had clear areas for improvement in their practice, but Annie and Suzie displayed more evidence of beginning to develop strong tutor identities. And while Melissa and Robert offered their tutees acceptable tutorial support, they did not offer data to suggest that they had started conceptualizing their identities as tutors. The format of the two preparation programs played a significant factor in these results, as the tutors prepared by the course had considerably more exposure to tutoring models and to the discourse of the writing center community. However, these data do not suggest that a workshop preparation program would be unable to address the four identity characteristics in its curriculum. Other institutions include a strong focus on developing tutor identities in condensed preparation programs.

The curriculum of the CRC preparation workshop did not give its participants the necessary tools to develop the effective tutor identity outlined by the workshop leader. A major factor preventing the development of a tutor identity was the limitation of time. Thus, while the workshop presented the participants with a model of effective and ineffective tutoring behaviors, it did not provide them with the time or space to reflect on them. Similarly, the participants were given a brief glimpse into the discourse of tutoring in the “Practical Tips” handout, but they were not given sufficient time to engage with this discourse, or any indication that it was just a very small part of a larger academic community. More importantly, the curriculum did not provide the participants with opportunities to engage in any kind of reflective practices, which prevented the participants from locating their identity within the larger field. Without multiple identity models and exposure to discourse, or the ability to reflect on their identity development as tutors, the tutors prepared only by the preparation workshop failed to develop tutor identities consistent with the goals of the program.

The two tutors prepared by the Writing 60 course as well as the one-day workshop, Annie and Suzie, developed stronger tutor identities. Because of their exposure to the discourse of tutoring, behavior and identity, as well as the introduction to the discourse of the writing center community, Annie and Suzie were well prepared to develop tutor identities consistent with those articulated by the Writing 60 instructor. The focus on metacognitive practices in the course allowed Suzie and Annie to construct self-reflective narratives in the writing center discourse that facilitated their development as writing tutors. Because the participants in the preparation course had ample exposure to multiple models of tutor identity and relevant readings, as well as significant opportunities to metacognitively reflect on their practices, the tutors prepared by both the workshop and the course developed appropriate tutor identities.

Implications

As with all case study research, there are limitations to the implications of this study. The data reported here are not representative of all writing tutor preparation programs; however, they tell an important story about the benefits of engaging tutors in identity development. Moreover, this study highlights how far undergraduate peer tutors of writing at the same institution were presented with varied opportunities for developing a tutor identity in their preparation programs. Writing center directors can utilize this information as they create their own tutor education program, in whatever format available to them, in order to consider the types of tutor identities they would like their tutors to develop. Additionally, this research can work to reconsider the “training” of undergraduate writing center tutors as tutor education or professional development. Because of the importance of the work in which they are about to engage. Similarly, because there is not a significant body of research regarding writing preparation programs for non-K-12-teachers, these stories highlight the need for all writing program administrators to consider the motivation and goals of the participants in their preparation programs, as well as to present them with multiple identity models and the discourse of the profession within the guise of a balanced praxis.
Content Area Teachers as Teachers of Writing

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Despite movements to increase writing across the curriculum, at the high school level writing instruction is primarily the domain of the English Language Arts (ELA) teacher. However, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) may change this. The standards, which had been adopted by 45 states as of this writing, include literacy standards for social studies/history, science, and technical subjects that specifically call on teachers in these areas1 to address discipline-specific reading and writing skills at the middle and high school grade levels (National Governors Association). As states move toward implementing these standards, teachers from all departments will be asked to become “teachers of writing.”

But are these teachers prepared to meet this challenge? And how can pre-service and in-service teachers in the content areas be supported to effectively incorporate writing into their classes? Drawing on work with high school science teachers, this article seeks to address these issues and offer suggestions for those working with writing teachers across the disciplines.

Relevant Literature

In their analysis of existing data, including data gathered as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Applebee and Langer found that “many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length” (i). They date this problem to the 1990s and the standards movement with its increased emphasis on reading and math, often at the expense of writing. While some states included questions which required written answers as part of the tests mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, Applebee and Langer suggest that “these may be shifting away from a broad program of writing instruction toward a much narrower focus on how to best answer particular types of test questions” (ii). In their national survey of high school social studies, language arts, and science teachers, Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken found that most writing assignments asked students to report information without analysis or interpretation; like Applebee and Langer, Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken point out that “efforts to improve writing are virtually nonexistent in the school reform efforts in the United States” (136), particularly reforms mandated by NCLB. The lack of time spent on writing in American schools prompted The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges to title their 2003 report The Neglected “R.” The Need for a Writing Revolution. However, although states have yet to begin standardizing testing over the Common Core State Standards, the standards may provoke change (if not a revolution); they appear to call for more complex writing tasks across the curriculum.

Yet teachers who have spent decades ignoring writing entirely or focusing only on writing test answers may not feel comfortable assigning or assessing other kinds of writing. In the field of science education, nearly 60% of teachers surveyed believed they were not prepared to teach writing (Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken). These teachers, self-identified as non-experts in the field of writing instruction, may share some qualities with non-expert writers. In the 1980s several studies were undertaken to compare expert and non-expert writers; researchers concluded that novice writers tended to overlook writing problems that experts recognize (Hayes et al.) and defined revision as fixing problems at the word or sentence level (e.g. Bredwill; Faigley and Wrie; Sommers). Likewise, a study comparing high school science teachers’ responses to student writing in the genre of science journalism to responses by a professional journalist found that the teachers focused on grammatical and typographical errors while the professional editor looked at a wide range of content- and genre-related issues (Kohnen).

The fact that content-area teachers are unprepared to teach writing should come as no surprise. Required coursework in teacher preparation is scant, with little if any writing. In their national survey of high school social studies, language arts, and science teachers, Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken found that most writing assignments asked students to report information without analysis or interpretation; like Applebee and Langer, Kiuhara, Graham, and Hawken point out that “efforts to improve writing are virtually nonexistent in the school reform efforts in the United States” (136), particularly reforms mandated by NCLB. The lack of time spent on writing in American schools prompted The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges to title their 2003 report The Neglected “R.” The Need for a Writing Revolution. However, although states have yet to begin standardizing testing over the Common Core State Standards, the standards may provoke change (if not a revolution); they appear to call for more complex writing tasks across the curriculum.

1 The fact that these literacy standards were included in the same document as the English Language Arts standards (and that the content-area literacy standards for grades K-5 were included as part of the ELA standards) did cause confusion, with some content-area teachers assuming that this meant disciplinary reading and writing was now part of the English Language Arts curriculum. However, the point of the Common Core Standards is to include writing across content areas.

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Works Cited


About the Author

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