

What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project

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About the Authors

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Any time I make an effort to understand another person's point of view, I reconnect to the values I learned in the process of becoming and serving as a peer tutor.

A former peer tutor, class of 1984

Within both the noisy and the quiet conversations in our writing centers, something extraordinary is happening. Undergraduate peer tutors are creating one of the most important experiences in their educational careers, a complex, multi-faceted experience whose influence persists not just years but decades after graduation. When undergraduate writing tutors and fellows participate in challenging and sustained staff education, and when they interact closely with other student writers and with other peer tutors through our writing centers and writing fellows programs, they develop in profound ways both intellectually and academically. This developmental experience, played out in their tutor education and in their work as peer tutors and fellows, helps to shape and sometimes transform them personally, educationally, and professionally.¹

Through the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), we have set out to explore and document what peer tutors take with them from their training and experience. We believe that by listening to what they have to tell us, we will better understand the powerful educational experiences of becoming a peer writing tutor in a college or university. Every writing center director has seen that student tutors learn as much about writing as do the students they tutor, if not more. We also know not only that tutors become better writers, but that they develop in a number of other highly consequential ways: as thinkers, as writers, and as developing professionals. As Kenneth Bruffee has argued since the 1970s, peer tutoring benefits the liberal education of peer tutors. We have received many eloquent testimonials to Bruffee's claim, as alumni send us, over the years and from far-flung locations, notes of gratitude for the lasting effects of our peer tutoring and writing fellows programs. The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project has made it possible for us to sample and analyze more systematically the reflections of 126 former tutors from our three institutions,

Marquette University, the University of Maine, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.² Collectively, the responses from these alumni total over 500 single-spaced pages.

The thick description that emerges from our research tells us in great detail about the value added of collaborative learning for the peer tutors themselves. Respondents assert that they developed

- a new relationship with writing,
- analytical power,
- a listening presence,
- skills, values, and abilities vital in their professions,
- skills, values, and abilities vital in families and in relationships,
- earned confidence in themselves,
- and a deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning.

These categories which we use below to report the findings from the PWTARP are, like all classifications, admittedly imperfect: categories overlap in multiple ways, simple labels are reductive, and brief quotations from such rich data inevitably pale compared to the full source. We do, however, believe that these are powerful ways to conceptualize the influence that peer tutoring has on tutors themselves. Ultimately, in this article we theorize peer tutoring as a form of liberal education for peer tutors themselves. And we support this claim with empirical evidence that this is deep learning that endures years, even decades, after graduation. We open by defining liberal education, using Kenneth Bruffee's arguments about peer tutoring and liberal education and William Cronon's definition of the goals of a liberal education. We then describe our survey methods and our research participants. In the heart of the article, we develop and illustrate each of our major findings listed above, demonstrating the breadth and depth of what former tutors have taken with them. In our conclusion, we argue that this research has profound implications for writing centers themselves: systematic tutor alumni research allows writing centers to resituate themselves as central to the educational mission of our colleges and universities.

Collaborative Learning and Liberal Education

Kenneth Bruffee predicted it well. In his 1978 *Liberal Education* article on establishing peer tutoring programs, “The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring,” Bruffee argues that the benefits for the tutors themselves go well beyond the gains in writing that one might anticipate from student tutors. Something more intense and intricate appears to be at work when students train and then engage repeatedly in tutoring writing. As Bruffee frames it, peer writing tutors form a “transitional community” in their tutor education, a temporary mutual aid group that fosters among them the kind of intellectual work that typifies knowledge-making communities in academe, in professions, and in civic life. Learning to learn collaboratively from and out of respect for each other, Bruffee argues, has a powerful impact on the peer tutors’ own education:

Experience with peer tutoring in the schools would lead us to expect some improvement in the tutors’ own work through tutoring, especially if the tutors’ academic record were poor to start with. But there is nothing in the literature on peer tutoring which would lead us to expect that average or somewhat above average undergraduates acting as tutors could develop rapidly through a process of peer influence a capacity [judgment] so essential to mature thought. (451)

When Bruffee argues that peer tutoring has something to do with the rapid development of “judgment” and “mature thought,” he opens the door to a different conception of a liberal education from the popular notion that focuses on certain classic texts and authors to be seriously encountered and struggled with, from Aristotle to Darwin to Toni Morrison. Bruffee suggests that a liberal education equates not only to familiarity with this or that prized text but also to the development of certain skills, values, and abilities.

To help us understand and articulate further for ourselves the skills, values, and abilities of a liberal education, we turned to William Cronon’s 1998 essay “‘Only Connect’. . . : The Goals of a Liberal Education.” To Cronon, liberal education does not consist of a required curriculum; it’s not a list of courses to complete or facts to know. Instead, he focuses on the *goals* of a liberal

education, on the “qualities of the human beings we would like that curriculum to produce” (75). And he urges us always to remember that the purpose of that curriculum “is to nurture human freedom and growth” (76). Cronon’s goals provide a powerful theoretical framework for understanding the results of the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project. Underlying all of Cronon’s goals is a deep concern for humanity for connections among people and an argument for the importance of communication within a liberal education. Among Cronon’s goals: Liberally educated people “listen and they hear.” “They read and they understand.” “They can talk with anyone.” “They can write clearly and persuasively and movingly.” “They practice humility, tolerance, and self-criticism.” “They nurture and empower the people around them” (76-78). As Cronon explains, liberally educated people

follow E. M. Forster’s injunction from *Howards End*: “Only connect.” More than anything else, being a liberally educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. . . . A liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect. (78)

And Cronon emphasizes that being liberally educated is not a finished “state”; it is a way of groping “toward wisdom,” “a way of educating ourselves without any illusion that our educations will ever be complete” (79). Cronon’s goals for a liberal education align powerfully with the results that Bruffee might well have predicted for our PWTARP: that the analysis and narratives offered by tutor alumni demonstrate, in multiple ways, the kinds of growth central to a liberal education.

Grounded in extensive praxis with the Brooklyn Plan, Bruffee theorizes that collaborative learning enhances the liberal education of peer tutors. Subsequent scholarship has either anecdotally supported Bruffee’s claim or simply assumed it to be true. But we are now able to demonstrate empirically and not merely characterize, as Boquet (474) describes what Bruffee does that peer tutoring benefits peer tutors. As we share our findings from the PTWARP, we are also doing more than identifying skills, values, and abilities that tutors take from their experience and education. We are proposing a

more comprehensive view of the value and influence of collaborative learning in writing centers, one that includes the impressive development of peer tutors themselves. This more comprehensive view of peer learning also allows writing centers, as we argue in our conclusion, to redefine their missions, recognizing themselves as unique spaces in the academy where peer tutors make dramatic leaps forward in their own liberal educations.

The Project

The PWTARP began with our desire to learn more systematically about our own tutor alumni, to probe beyond the anecdotal evidence we had from our informal exchanges with former tutors. Above all, we wanted to learn which abilities, values, and skills tutors developed from their education and experience as peer writing tutors and how, if at all, they had used those abilities, values, and skills in their lives beyond graduation. From early on we have also had another goal for this project. We have found it consistently illuminating and motivating to do this research across our three different universities and programs, including an undergraduate writing fellows program as well as peer-tutoring writing centers. Because of the strengths of this collaborative research, we wanted to encourage further research with tutor alumni and about tutor learning that went beyond our own three universities and any one time. So we created the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (Kail, Gillespie, and Hughes), to encourage colleagues to do similar research. Through our web site we've shared our survey instrument for others to use and adapt, as well as advice for colleagues about getting started with this kind of research, obtaining approval for human subjects research, finding tutor alumni, choosing a sample, and maximizing the response rate.

The survey itself is deliberately open-ended and flexible because we wanted to give alumni room to respond in ways we could never anticipate, and because we want colleagues who participate in the PWTARP to replicate or adapt our survey design to their own institutions and to their own research goals. We tried to design open-ended questions that would elicit full responses, not too scripted, we hoped, by the questions.

We asked former tutors, for example, to list the “most significant

abilities, values, or skills that you developed in your work as a peer writing tutor.” Asking such open-ended questions invited some unexpected responses, and we got some. Would former tutors tell us that their writing had improved? In their professions, had they used abilities they developed from their tutoring? Had those skills carried over to their personal relationships? We also wanted to know whether tutoring experience gives alumni an edge in job interviews. At one of our conference presentations early in the process, an audience member asked us, “Isn’t there anything negative about tutoring?” So we included that question on the survey: “Were there any downsides to your tutoring experience?” In addition, we chose to include a few quantifiable responses, in spite of our reservations about what numbers really mean in response to questions like these. So we attached Likert scales to some questions, especially to gauge the importance of the tutoring experience for our alumni. Although we’ve kept the core questions constant, we have all tweaked the survey slightly when we have sent it out, and we trust that others will do the same as they use it. For a current version of the PWTARP survey, see Appendix A below. For more information about our survey design, see Kail, Gillespie, and Hughes, “The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project: An Invitation to Research.”

Anyone who looks at our research design and findings with an appropriately critical eye will naturally wonder whether our alumni’s education and experience as peer tutors account for what they take with them or whether the peer tutoring and writing fellows programs at our universities simply do a good job of selecting student tutors. We have no doubt that the students entering these programs already have relatively strong writing and communication skills, and they do not enter this experience as blank slates with no values or abilities. Throughout our research, we have insisted on viewing writing fellows and peer tutors developmentally; our survey questions deliberately ask about developing—not about acquiring or about learning—skills, abilities, and values. In their responses to these questions, our tutor alumni, going back decades, are absolutely clear—in both quantitative and qualitative responses—that their education and experience as peer tutors played a crucial role in their developing much further and in sophisticated ways the skills, values,

and abilities that they claim.

The PWTARP extends the work of various writing center scholars who have done research in two intersecting areas—tutor-alumni research and tutor-learning research. Some—perhaps even most—of the tutor-alumni research is, in fact, unpublished. We know, for example, of numerous writing center and writing fellows directors who have developed rich unpublished collections of surveys from tutor alumni, gathered over years and decades. These surveys serve an important function in local writing center assessment; surveying alumni also builds and maintains valuable connections with former tutors. In publications, several former tutors have offered insightful reflections about what they learned and how they grew intellectually and socially from their experience as tutors (Douglass; Kedia; McGlaun; Purdy). And since the 1980s, several writing center scholars have argued in print that tutoring prepares students for future careers, in teaching (Almasy and England; Clark; Cox; Denton; Hammerbacher, Phillips, and Tucker; Harris; Monroe; Neulieb; Zelnak et al.), as well as in many other fields (Bell; Dinitz and Kiedaisch; Welsch; Whalen). Some of these arguments are theoretical, some based on anecdotal evidence, some based on research. As part of her important discussion of the multiple ways in which writing centers “enhance and advance a culture of academic seriousness,” Molly Wingate examines what the writing center at Colorado College offers tutors: “skills for their professional lives,” as well as “a community,” “a locus where tutors learn about and practice teaching and where they can be with peers who are serious writers” (8, 10). In his book about secondary writing centers, Richard Kent mentions that students “who staffed The Writing Center gained confidence, perspective, and understanding as writers and people” (5). “These students grew to value the power of listening, the necessity of encouragement, and the respect of process” (6). In *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner welcome tutors to an “experience that can change your life, if you allow it to” (9). Drawing on written reflections that consultants complete at the end of each term and from survey research with consultant alumni at Wright State University, Nicole Macklin, Cynthia K. Marshall, and Joe Law not only explore tutor learning and career benefits of tutoring but also argue that such

research should be part of any writing center assessment. Neal Lerner similarly recommends that writing center assessment include assessment of tutor learning (71). The most recent published research, based on our PWTARP model, is an ambitious study with responses from 135 former tutors at the University of Vermont, focusing primarily on career development (Dinitz and Kiedaisch).

Our Alumni Participants by the Numbers

Of the 148 surveys we systematically distributed to former tutors and writing fellows who had graduated as far back as 1982, 126 surveys were completed, yielding an extraordinary 85.1% response rate. The responses to the first section of our survey give us a demographic portrait of our former tutors and their lives beyond undergraduate studies and tutoring. Of the respondents, 58.7% were female; 41.3% male. All of the former tutors had completed a compulsory semester-long tutor-education course. Almost all had participated in regular staff meetings and ongoing education, about half had participated in social events for tutors and fellows, and 41.3% had presented at regional and national writing center and composition conferences. The number of semesters they were undergraduate writing tutors or fellows ranged from one to six; the average number of semesters tutoring for all alumni in this study was close to three (2.84). When asked about further education beyond their undergraduate degrees, 66.1% of those who responded to this question were pursuing or had completed advanced degrees in such varied fields as social work, composition and rhetoric, literary studies, law, journalism, education, divinity, history, psychology, microbiology, political science, counseling, creative writing, economics, music, professional writing, and medicine.

One of the important strengths of our study is that our respondents were not all recent graduates. Because the peer-tutoring program at the University of Maine has such a long tradition, stretching back to its beginning in 1981, the alumni respondents in our study ranged in age from 22 to 77, averaging 32.3 years old at the time they completed the survey. Of our respondents, 24% had graduated in the 1980s, 33.6% in the 1990s, and 42.4% between 2000 and 2007. Figure 1 shows the distribution of respondents across graduation years.

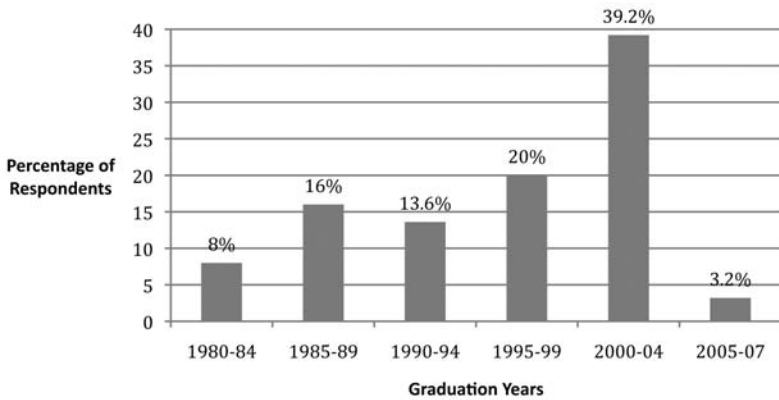


Figure 1. Graduation Years for Survey Respondents. (n=126)

This variety in age and in stage of life gives us, in fact, even more confidence in the claims we make in this article that the effects of having been educated and having worked as a peer tutor and writing fellow are deep, and that these effects endure for, in fact, decades after graduation. Students just a few years out of college might be expected to feel the effects of peer tutoring or fellowing in their further schooling or entry-level jobs. But it's powerful to hear former tutors twenty, or even thirty, years beyond their college experience tell us that they still feel the effects of a course they took and a job they held as undergraduates.

Reading the list of occupations pursued by these former tutors is fascinating for many reasons. First, it's a pleasure to learn what our former tutors have done after graduation. Second, it shows how many different kinds of occupations former tutors pursue. Finally, it demonstrates that the skills, abilities, and values tutors develop from tutoring are widely applicable in varied careers, including ones far afield from teaching and writing. Of their careers, some of the most common were in teaching (at every level, from kindergarten to university level), sales, journalism, technical writing, writing in new media, editing, corporate communications, social work, counseling

and psychology, management, law, and community, non-profit, and social-advocacy work. Other tutor alumni in this study included an aspiring actor, an assistant district attorney, a musician, the executive director of a national folk festival, a lobbyist, an anesthesiology technician, a mate on a yacht, a psychology researcher, a project manager for a remodeling firm, a mortgage administrator for a bank, a VISTA member, a Peace Corps volunteer, an office manager, an analyst for the US Defense Department, and a biotech patent agent.

One other number stands out from our research. In some ways, we hardly needed to ask a Likert-scale question to measure how important this experience had been for our former tutors and fellows: the response rate and the sheer volume and eloquence of what they wrote in response to the surveys answered that question. But with certain audiences and in certain rhetorical situations, there's nothing like a clear-cut, easily understood number. When we asked tutor alumni to rate how important their education and experience as tutors and fellows had been in their development as undergraduate students (Question 10), the response was stunning. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = unimportant; 5 = highly important), the mean was 4.48. For a summary of all of the Likert-scale responses, see Figure 2.

Question #	Question	Scale	n	Mean
4	Would you rate the importance of your training and/or experience as a tutor in the <i>interviewing or hiring process for your first job?</i>	1 = not influential 5 = very influential	99	3.73
6	Would you rank the importance <i>for your occupation</i> of the skills, qualities, or values you developed as a tutor?	1 = unimportant 5 = highly important	102	4.39

7	To what extent has <i>your writing</i> been influenced by your training and/or work as a tutor?	1 = not influenced 5 = very influenced	103	4.32
10	Would you please rate the importance your writing center/writing fellow training and experience as you developed as a university student?	1 = not important 5 = highly important	102	4.48

Figure 2. Mean Ratings for Likert-Scale Responses: Assessment of Peer-Tutoring Experience.

Our Findings

To analyze our findings, we used an organic, recursive process. Each of us independently read each response to the open-ended questions and developed detailed lists of themes that we saw. With some questions (the first, for example, in which we ask alumni to list skills, values, and abilities), it was a relatively straightforward task to group similar concepts and to identify the most frequent responses. Questions that asked for narratives, however, required more interpretation as we identified key concepts within a narrative (confidence and listening are good examples of what's illustrated in some of the narratives). We then compared our lists of themes and clustered these detailed themes into fewer more general ones; those most frequent themes formed the categories for the findings we report here. In developing these categories our aim was not only to convey the most common themes within the responses, but also to convey some of the richness of the data and to showcase some of the surprises. Reading, comparing, probing, debating the meaning of, and living with these responses over the several years of this research project—this kind of analysis was a joy for all of us. These everyday transformations of collaborative learning develop over time and with experience; they are described as enduring and profound.

In our analysis, seven key findings emerged, which we explain and illustrate, using the voices of tutor alumni, in the following

sections of this article. From their education and experience as peer tutors, alumni developed a new relationship with writing; analytical power; a listening presence; skills, values, and abilities vital in their professions; skills, values, and abilities vital in families and in relationships; earned confidence in themselves; and a deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning. To illustrate the richness of what tutors learned, we have organized these findings to move from those most closely related to writing to ones with far-reaching implications for intellectual, professional, social, and personal development and richer understandings of the collaborative nature of learning itself.

A New Relationship with Writing

It is a given, at least in the world of writing centers, that tutoring writing leads to improvement in the writing of the tutor as well as the writer. Our surveys more than confirm this commonsense notion of collaborative learning. Almost all of the former tutors report that the experience of training and working as a writing fellow or peer writing tutor helped them become markedly better writers: more organized, more concise, more focused, more persuasive, more fluent, more savvy. They clearly take with them from their undergraduate experience a satisfying sense of confidence in their writing, and they develop their careers, in part, on an instrumental and sophisticated literacy.

What interests us most in the survey results on writing is what they show us about the power of collaborative learning in writing centers and writing fellows programs to create educational change among the tutors themselves. For some former peer writing tutors, the changes in their own writing are explained in developmental terms—an intensification in specific ways of getting better at what they were already doing well to begin with: their writing has become more precise, more organized, more argumentative, etc. One former tutor (1995), now the editor for a small Maine town newspaper, expresses this paradigm clearly: “It wasn’t so much a matter of learning any one skill or ability as finding a place that helped accelerate my growth in all areas of my writing.”

The developmental model, however, does not entirely account for

the changes that many former tutors experience. For them, becoming better writers involves something of a transformation as they entered into a new relationship with the writing process itself, and, most significantly, with other writers, as Bruffee predicted. By working in a reflective and respectful way with others, they experience their own writing process from an entirely new perspective. The surveys are filled with comments such as these: “It changed the way I approached writing completely,” or “I began to think about writing differently through the writing center,” or “It changed my whole view of writing.”

Their attitude toward revision is emblematic of this new relationship with the writing process. Prior to their tutoring experience, they may have been exposed to the idea of revision, but they never saw it in action before in such exciting ways, both in their own writing and in the writing of those they worked with. Many tutors point out that their writing center experience enabled them to “depersonalize” a written piece, and “find out where and how it works or does not work.” The ability to stand back from their own writing and see it “whole” suggests not simply the acquisition of a writing skill, but a new relationship between the self and language, as is suggested in this statement from a tutor who graduated in 1985:

The peer tutoring experience can allow a certain detachment from one’s own writing; that is, I can often remove myself from the fact that it’s me writing and focus instead on the words and how they communicate ideas, the same way I would if I was reading and critiquing someone else’s work.

The ability to “detach” or “remove oneself” from one’s writing speaks eloquently to our sense that peer tutors become better writers not only because they “accelerate” the skills and abilities that they bring with them, but also because they come through their training and experience to a new and more mature understanding of the relationship between the writer’s self and the writer’s words.

Closely tied to this insider’s view of the writing process and the ability to distinguish between one’s words and oneself is the willingness tutors frequently cite in the surveys to open themselves to the kind of tutoring and critique that they formerly provided to student writers. The willingness to seek out and accept criticism is echoed throughout the surveys as one of the features of their writing

that they carry with them beyond graduation, and is further evidence of their new relationship with writing. A technical writer for the automotive industry reflects that

Before tutoring[,] writing was a solo experience. . . . Now my writing process always includes asking as many people as I can recruit to sit down with me, to read my drafts, and to share their ideas with me. I can't imagine writing anything important without invoking the writer/tutor conversation.

This strongly suggests to us that learning to trust their language in the hands of others is one of the most important values that former tutors take with them, and is an outward reflection of an inner change, as one former tutor, now a college instructor herself, describes: "There was a shift inside myself I was no longer a writer on the sidelines with some knowledge I could argue with myself about. Did I really know this? I was an articulate, confident participant in the process and interaction of ideas and writing."

Analytical Power

Former tutors and fellows tell us proudly that they become adept at problem solving through their training and work as tutors. In the tutoring situation the tutor must be able to solve many intricate and interconnected problems almost simultaneously. Thinking on one's feet, then, becomes essential to the successful tutorial, as tutor alumni frequently pointed out to us, and the basis for their creative problem solving rests on their becoming adept at analyzing quickly a piece of writing that is read aloud to them or that they read in preparation for a conference. What does the paper need? What does the writer need? What does the professor need? Perhaps there are fifty minutes to try to solve the multi-dimensional puzzle of tutoring writing. Perhaps there is half an hour. As we read and reread the surveys, we began to understand the tutorial situation as a kind of intellectual crucible through which the tutor must meld her rhetorical analysis of the student's text, the complex rhetorical situation created within the peer tutoring relationship, and the disciplinary and discourse expectations of the institution into a seamless whole of conversation. And, oh yes, the paper is due soon.

In many replies, analysis and self-confidence were paired. A few mentioned that their ability to analyze helped them read differently permanently. Others framed analysis in terms of critical thinking. Some commented on developing a metalanguage that allowed them to talk with writers analytically. As one former tutor, now a management consultant, put it, “Most significant was a conceptual shift from encountering language in terms of what it says to dealing with it in terms of what it does. I can’t emphasize the force of this movement between levels of abstraction enough; it changed how I read everything.”

Tutors, through their analytical abilities, nurture and empower learning, deepen and enrich it in meaningful ways. This is a purposeful, active kind of analysis we see in few other college situations. And tutors continue to use these analytical and creative moves well into their lives as professionals, as liberally educated people, able to contribute to their worlds. An editor and author says, “I learned to read closely for unity and coherence as well as for purpose, genre, and audience in support of the revision process, whether my own or other writers’.” In a similar vein, an executive director of a national folk festival explains:

My time as a peer tutor honed my skills in being able to focus on the “heart” of a writing project, and to develop a writing strategy (mine and others’) of targeting a project to its intended audience—considering what information it is fair to consider as “common knowledge” and what arguments need to be made above and beyond that shared information. . . . The majority of the marketing projects that I have developed have begun with an analysis of the audience for the message, and the core elements of that message. This strategy springs directly from the experiences that I had as a tutor, examining a lot of information (as in a disorganized paper), and guiding the writer to extract the crucial information.

A Listening Presence

Recognizing themselves as good communicators is almost universal among peer writing tutor alumni. Although the language that they use to describe their abilities to communicate varies from an emphasis on overall “inter-personal communication skills” and

“collaborative style” to specific strengths in question asking and one-to-one conferencing, nearly all the respondents pride themselves on the ability to make meaningful contact with others in complex rhetorical situations. However, the single most frequently mentioned and specific communication skill that respondents across all three institutions and programs list and elaborate on is what they frequently refer to as “active listening.” Nearly half of all the respondents single out a new appreciation for and facility with listening to others as a highly valued skill that they take with them across the border of graduation and into further studies and into careers, as well as into their family and social lives.

Listening clearly activates and reinforces other communicative abilities, alumni tell us. Being able to listen carefully is inextricable from a variety of other skills, abilities, and values that tutor alumni regard as significant. Tutor alumni tell us that listening translates into personal and professional choices and actions. It is no coincidence, we believe, that Cronon lists listening first as a quality of a liberally educated person, and we agree. Because respect is stressed in our three programs, tutors can embody what Krista Ratcliffe calls rhetorical listening, a kind of listening by which people attempt not just to hear but to understand others. The listening that takes place in the writing center is close to Ratcliffe’s goal of listening as understanding: “Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us . . .” (28). The one-to-one conference that is at the center of most peer-tutoring practice proves to be a rich environment for cultivating the habit of active, rhetorical listening.

In the intimacy of the one-to-one setting, peer tutors must assume the responsibility for listening carefully to the writer. After all, the tutors are in charge of the session, and they feel obliged to provide what they refer to as a “sounding board” or “a fresh set of ears” or a “listening presence in the room,” allowing the writer to work through the issues and complexities of the writing assignment at hand. As one respondent from Maine put it, students need to “talk it through . . . before they can write it out,” and as one Marquette tutor put it, by demonstrating to the student writer that she was willing to listen, the writer “learns that I was willing to invest myself in the session.” “Sit

still, listen, and stay out of the way,” as one former Marquette tutor put it, or, as one University of Wisconsin writing fellow phrased it, “I find that silence plays a big part in maintaining student ownership of the work at hand.” Careful, purposeful listening in the tutorial is perhaps the most dramatic way that peer writing tutors demonstrate to writers and to themselves that they care about the student and about the student’s writing, without appropriating the work of the writer. The tutor’s listening empowers the student writer.

Listening also opens the door to many of the other skills and abilities that former tutors take with them. Many former peer writing tutors pair listening with effective question asking, which serves as a basic rhetorical move for building tutorial conversations. “Open-ended, patient questioning,” one former Madison tutor wrote, leads to conversation, which becomes then a means of analysis. A Marquette tutor put this analytical aspect of listening nicely into perspective: “I like to listen to students both for what they were saying and for what they weren’t.” “My job, then,” according to a UMaine tutor, was to “listen, empathize, and ask questions that will help the writer find her own solutions.” All of this listening, question asking, followed by more listening calls for copious amounts of patience, and the patience necessary to listen well is a kind of side effect or prerequisite, perhaps, for developing the kind of active listening skills that the tutorial environment demands of peer writing tutors. “Patience, patience, patience” writes one former Marquette tutor in response to the question of what values, skills, or abilities he took with him.

While the tutor training class and the tutorial itself are training grounds for effective listening, it is obvious from our surveys that effective listening, in particular, and good communication skills overall play a vital role in the lives of peer tutors after they graduate. They acknowledge these skills as significant in the interviewing process for jobs, and once they have those jobs, the listening skills that they have developed serve them very well as they develop careers. As technical writers, they know how to listen effectively to engineers and software experts, and they know how to listen to bosses and co-workers, too. As one former UMaine tutor explained about his work as an editor for a daily newspaper, “Any time I make an effort to understand another person’s point of view, I reconnect to the values

I learned in the process of becoming and serving as a peer tutor.”

One of the most surprising results of the surveys was this: learning to be an effective listener through peer tutoring has had a significant impact on former tutors’ family and social lives as sons and daughters, parents, and friends. As one now-veteran mother noted, “You can’t tell a toddler anything, but [you] can persuade her that you are listening to her perspective and offer alternatives that meet both your needs.” Many former tutors report that their listening skills modeled on their tutoring experience have become an integral part of developing their relationship with partners and children. Not only does this “communication skill” lead to better conversation, better relationships, and better understanding among friends, it also, according to some former tutors, leads to a better understanding of self. As one former UMaine tutor wrote, “I realized through tutoring experience that I was one of those people who while conversing spent all the time internally phrasing their next point instead of listening to what the other person was saying.” Another tutor wrote that listening made her “more human.”

The significance of acquiring effective listening skills for former peer tutors cannot be overstated. It is for many a newfound strength from which they have built other important components of their character, from empathy to patience to self-understanding. As one former UMaine tutor put it, “I didn’t so much learn to listen as I saw how important listening can be and how powerful it can be if you do it well. I guess listening could go down on the list as a value instead of a skill.”

Skills, Values, and Abilities in Professions

Much of the academic work students do in college seems to bear little resemblance to the work they will be called upon to do in their careers after college. We have found, however, that the educational experience of training and working as a peer writing tutor or fellow has a direct and singular impact on the work that many if not most of those we surveyed engage in after graduation. As one former UMaine student put it, the correlation between peer tutoring and career relevance is “eerie.” Our surveys clearly demonstrate that training and experience in tutoring writing have a lasting impact on most

former students, beginning with the way they handle job interviews and continuing on to the types of career choices they make and their professional advancement.

For those who go into careers based on writing, such as technical writing, journalism, and editing, peer tutoring serves with the student's major as the foundation for entering the profession. As one former tutor, now a veteran editor for a daily newspaper, says, "in many ways, the extraordinary experience . . . of writing and talking about writing with other writers . . . never ended. . . . No workday goes by, quite frankly, without some echo of what I learned as a peer tutor." For many, the experience of being peer tutors "cemented" their desire to put writing at the center of their professional ambitions. In the surveys, they write eloquently of the "joy" of finding their way into the writing process by learning to help others find their way. They learn to accept criticism as an essential component of the writing process, and they take not only a willingness to be critiqued but also the desire for feedback from others into their working lives. Their familiarity with the give and take of peer review has stood them in good stead in newsrooms, editorial offices, and management meetings.

The influence of peer tutoring on those tutor alumni who become teachers is profound. For those who came into writing centers with their vocation as teachers already in mind, the experience of training and tutoring serves as an affirmation of their interests in and an apprenticeship to that first teaching job after college, a "first taste" as one tutor put it; collaborative learning continues to influence their teaching many years and teaching positions later. They bring with them from the writing center their practiced knowledge of writing processes, a respect for individual differences in writing styles among students, and the nuanced diplomatic and conversational skills necessary for the intimate instruction of the one-to-one conference, among other values and abilities. From their writing center and writing fellows experience, they also bring to their teaching a particular approach to teaching and learning: a deep respect for students and a collaborative ethic as well as a commitment to student-centered instruction. From a high school history teacher:

I think my philosophy/approach to teaching is also informed by my

experience as a [writing] fellow. My classes are highly interactive—usually discussion based—and reflect the writing fellows’ philosophy that students should play a more active role in their own education. I do give a lot of responsibility to my students, as the WFP [Writing Fellows Program] does. And having gained more of a philosophical appreciation for the role of questioning, praise, and listening in the WFP, and especially [the seminar for Writing Fellows] . . . these have become staples of my teaching practice.

Many former peer tutors report also that their tutoring experience brought them to teaching as a profession in the first place. Phrases such as “revealed to me” or “gave me a first glimpse” or “made it possible for me to recognize myself as a teacher” or “made me conscious of my skills as a teacher” are common in the surveys of those who have gone into teaching as a direct result of their tutoring experiences. The writing center influence on undergraduate tutors who go on to become teachers at all levels of education is genuinely profound and, to us, deeply encouraging and satisfying.

While writing-based careers and teaching have both become important callings for former tutors, most go into occupations and professions that might not seem particularly connected to writing center work: sales, social work, acting, management, development work, legal work, medicine, etc. For many of these alumni, the writing center experience did not influence their choice of careers, but as many of them point out, “it made me so much better at what I do.” For one thing, writing remains an important part of what many former peer tutors do, even if they do not have “writer” in their official titles. In addition, overall communication skills, particularly effective and active listening, are cited as essential to the development of careers in nearly all fields. Furthermore, survey respondents consistently identify the analytical and organizational skills they derived from the training and experience as foundational to their success. They frequently point out parallels in what they are now doing with what they learned as writing center tutors and writing fellows, such as the psychologist who talked in detail about the similarities between the analysis of prose and the analysis of personality or the web designer who argues that the structure of a good argumentative essay has served him well as he builds websites. Writing center training and tutoring

provide students with a new kind of intellectual understanding of the structure “behind” things that they carry with them into a myriad of occupations and professions. Finally, the experience of writing center work becomes for many former tutors a model for work that is intellectually engaging, emotionally satisfying, and socially important. As one former tutor put it, his writing center training and experience “stand out as a kind of ideal for what I want to be doing.”

Skills, Values, and Abilities in Families and in Relationships

By asking alumni whether the abilities, skills, and values that they developed from their peer tutoring experience have played a role in their social or family relationships, we hit another rich vein. We asked this question because we felt that the influence of peer tutoring extended beyond the professional, academic, and occupational realms of life, and because we’re committed to exploring the breadth of the influence of this experience. Although roughly 15% of respondents said no or simply did not answer this question (more non-responses than was the case for any other question), the vast majority of tutor alumni responded with a definite yes. Many alumni explained that they have become valuable, trusted coaches for the writing that their children, partners, parents, roommates, and friends do, and some told, with joy, of the successes that friends and family have had with their writing. As several point out, giving feedback on or advice about writing to family, to loved ones, or to partners is tricky territory—that’s where their diplomacy and tact and listening skills, often attributed to their tutor education and experience, have come in handy.

The influence on social and family relationships is, however, about much more than helping with writing. Our research participants have told us that the experience of writing tutoring and the values that underlie its practice are, in fact, preparation for developing strong, respectful, and collaborative relationships with family, partners, and friends. Over and over and with consistency, tutor alumni responses to this question reveal wisdom about connecting with others (a part of Cronon’s exhortation to develop “the generosity and the freedom to connect” [78]), about developing and sustaining human

relationships, and tutor alumni attribute these abilities and values directly to their tutoring education and experience. One respondent said, “The interpersonal and communication skills you gain through tutoring are invaluable in all aspects of life, whether you are tutoring someone on a five-page paper or trying to help your wife figure out how to baste a turkey. Tutoring is like communicating boot camp.” They report that the non-judgmental listening and patience they learned as tutors are invaluable in communicating with their toddlers and teenage children as well as with adult partners. The active listening skills they developed as tutors help as they build relationships with others. They have learned to create a reciprocal dialogue, to have and to communicate respect for others’ points of views and compassion for their situations: “To be a good friend, sister, daughter, etc., you have to treat others with respect and compassion.” Some tutor alumni noted that the culture of self-reflection within tutor education and staff meetings leads to these powerful insights about family and social relationships: “I think having reflected critically on how we relate to students in conferences made me more aware of how I relate to friends and family.”

Earned Confidence: Transcending Skills and Abilities

We found it striking that the word “confidence” itself or the concept came up in response to almost every question we asked. It’s not a skill, not an ability—it’s an attitude towards the self. It is a concept that neither Bruffee nor Cronon mentions specifically, but it reveals the kinds of attitudes that allow tutors to develop judgment within communities, as Bruffee advocates, and it allows the kinds of connections with others and the world that Cronon describes in a liberally educated individual. As confidence develops and grows, some tutors experience it and describe it as transformative.

Time and again, tutor and fellow alumni reported that their attitudes about themselves, their self-confidence, had developed significantly. By one count, the word “confidence” itself was used 177 times in the survey responses. And more than that, the answers projected attitudes of confidence; former tutors embodied it in their replies. This increased self-confidence underlies and is interconnected with all of the skills and abilities we discuss in this article.

Former tutors and fellows told us repeatedly that they had gained confidence in their ability to tutor. Once they got the full sense of tutoring's complexities, they report having felt intimidated initially, especially when they began to grasp that the work they would do with writers is high-stakes work. A tutor can influence how well a student does on a paper, can help students think more deeply and critically about subject matter, can help writers gain admission into law and medical schools, can get them that coveted interview with Teach for America, or can even give them a leg up on a Rhodes or a Truman Scholarship. But these former tutors and fellows go on to tell us that their confidence grows as they experiment and succeed with writers.

Once they acquire that tutoring confidence, they speak of those high-stakes sessions in upbeat, energetic ways. One tutor listed "courage under fire" as something she had gained. Another said,

I felt *empowered and confident* as a peer tutor in writing because I possessed effective writing skills and could participate in an academic dialogue on writing and peer tutoring, but I felt *good* because I used this knowledge and skills to accomplish a meaningful end. That is, helping others to improve their writing abilities. (Emphasis hers)

Tutoring seems to have had a powerful effect on former tutors' confidence in job interviews. A former drama major working as a restaurant server said that if she could get the job interview, she'd have it nailed because of her confidence in her speaking skills. An environmental educator was told that his "conversation and questioning skills during interviews were strong qualities." An anesthesia technician attributed to tutoring his being "calm and relaxed" during his job interview. He commented that this calmness was also a function of maturity, but he went on to say that tutoring had contributed to his maturing process. He said, "Though I don't empirically know this for certain, I feel confident that my experience in the W[riting] F[ellows] program aided in my maturation as a whole person, since *articulating one's ideas* has so much to do with learning and growing" (emphasis his).

Most striking, perhaps, was the enthusiasm tutors expressed about their abilities to write. They claimed that tutoring made them

feel “confident, comfortable, and skilled” at clear, concise writing. They gained respect on the job and were praised by their bosses for “having a flair with words.” A few, including one technical writer, claimed to be able to write with “style and voice.” A clinical social worker said, “I AM a writer. I feel confident calling myself a writer.” This reflection from a graduate-school-bound Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme alumnus summed up the statements of many:

I think that the practical experience gained sitting across from diverse individuals and in the span of an hour getting to know their positions, their plight, and to get a sense of what they need, has given me a definite edge when faced with a one-on-one situations, whether in interviews, or confronting the guy behind the counter at the rental car station.

A Deeper Understanding of and Commitment to Collaborative Learning

A number of our previous findings suggest that the source for the transformational experience that many tutors undergo can be found in the collaborative nature of their tutor education and their writing center experience. In their tutor education and their tutoring sessions, they learn to value other students as well as their professors as instrumental in their own learning. They discover a new relationship with writing in large measure because they invest themselves in the notion that feedback from peers will make a difference. They acquire active listening skills because they find that, by demonstrating their ability to listen, they generate mutual trust and gain the kind of authority that they need in order to lead in a collaborative situation.

Student tutors earn confidence as they prove to themselves that they can, in fact, help other students become better writers. It may seem paradoxical, but it’s the experience of focusing on another’s learning that seems to change peer tutors themselves. Key to this, we believe, is that peer tutors take on an agency that’s often lacking in their own classroom learning and in peer-review activities. Peer tutors are entrusted, often for one of the first times in their many years as students, with responsibility for guiding someone else’s development and even learning, and they face a wide variety of writers and challenging writing situations, situations involving real writing

with real consequences, over sustained periods of time. Tutors take this responsibility seriously and it can have a profound influence on them. Because of the intense individual interaction at the heart of peer tutoring, which necessarily emphasizes identification with others—a quality that Cronon lists in his definition of a liberal education—tutors learn to see writing and learning from another writer’s perspective and to focus on what helps and what hinders learning. Unlike new teachers in a classroom with twenty or thirty students, tutors and fellows focus intensively on a single student and engage in a sustained, individualized conversation with a succession of individual students. From these conversations, they see first hand the power of collaborative talk. They discover how crucial it is to learning for writers to know that someone cares about, listens to, respects, and empathizes with them. They find common ground with strangers, and they learn how crucial it is to tap into another student’s interests. They learn to talk about ideas with other students, developing “the ability,” explained a former Marquette tutor, “to draw people into conversations about their ideas.” They learn to be comfortable operating with less than one hundred percent certainty: “I learned that I don’t always have the answers, nor does any teacher or tutor.” They develop a willingness to take chances, to do the kind of creative problem solving we’ve described. They learn to see multiple right answers. And they learn to respect approaches very different from their own and discover how their own preconceptions can get in the way.

Peer tutoring inevitably puts the issue of authority on the table, and tutors have to grapple with it. Are they peers or are they tutors? How can they be both at the same time? This struggle is, we believe, at the core of the movement from perceiving education only as a hierarchical relationship to one that is also collaborative. As a Wisconsin writing fellow put it, what finally matters most is “Establishing a relationship with a student based on mutual respect, not solely on my authority as a tutor.” Mutual respect is the key to genuine collaborative learning, and respect for other students is explicitly referenced throughout the surveys: respect for the diversity of writing strategies, respect for differing ways of thinking about important issues in the disciplines, respect for different learning styles, respect for the mutual struggle

to write and be heard in the academy. Tutors come to understand and believe in the power of learning collaboratively with peers, of sharing knowledge and responsibility for contributing to understanding or solving a problem or creating new knowledge—just as Bruffee predicted—because they experience it again and again, up close and personal, and because they themselves benefit. Survey respondents from all three universities explained that they came to view *tutoring as learning*, and that they saw learning as reciprocal; tutoring “taught me how to empower the students, which actually empowered me as a tutor.” As a former writing fellow from the University of Wisconsin-Madison explained, “I came out of the program with a deeper appreciation of a collaborative learning style of instruction.” Many alumni make it clear that this collaborative approach to learning and to interacting with others—and the values underlying these approaches—persists well beyond the work of being a peer tutor.

Resituating the Writing Center: A Second Claim for Centrality

Although the analysis we’ve offered here only scratches the surface of what alumni have told us, we’ve found analyzing and debating the meaning of our findings wonderfully challenging and enriching. We weren’t surprised that former tutors took important things with them from their education and experience as fellows and tutors and from being part of a community of peer tutors. But tutor alumni tell us that there are many nuanced and sophisticated ways in which they have developed from this experience. Alumni are not simply parroting back what they heard in a one-semester tutor-education course. In five hundred pages of responses, they have given us, in narrative and analysis, detailed evidence that this is learning that sticks. How many other undergraduate courses and experiences could, fifteen or twenty years later, offer such detailed evidence of learning and such detailed evidence of staying power and transferability?

Our findings, together with those from the other formal and informal studies we discuss in our literature review, illustrate just how powerful a learning experience peer tutoring can be for undergraduates and, more specifically, just how much deep experience

with collaborative learning gives tutors a sense of themselves as active participants in higher education who can contribute to the goals of liberal education described by Bruffee and Cronon. Our study demonstrates that the influence of being a peer tutor is strong, and that its effects endure—two years and ten years and even twenty years beyond graduation. As one respondent explained, “Being a writing fellow was the absolute highlight of my undergraduate education—it was an experience that changed my life, and for which I will always be grateful.” Our results show that the influence of being a tutor cuts across future fields of study and professions. And the influence holds across institutions and across kinds of writing center programs, including a writing fellows program.

We’re delighted to see many other colleges and universities be inspired to do similar research, using and adapting the PWTARP model based on their particular interests and needs. In recent years, colleagues at Swarthmore College, the University of Vermont, the University of Kansas, Penn State, Salt Lake City Community College, Duke, George Mason, and many other schools have surveyed their tutor alumni using versions of the PWTARP survey. As we’ve argued here and elsewhere, we believe that such research is a crucial form of assessment for writing centers and writing fellows programs, and an exciting and manageable form of research for tutors and directors to undertake.

Ultimately, however, our research about tutor learning demonstrates something even more important—a crucial understanding that writing centers with peer tutoring or writing fellows programs are more than sites of service to their institutions, much more. Through the influence our centers have on their student staff in peer tutoring programs, writing centers can and should make a second claim (Gillespie, Hughes, and Kail 36-38) for the centrality of their programs: the education of undergraduate students as writers, readers, listeners, creative problem solvers, and liberally educated human beings. As we have demonstrated, the skills, values, and abilities undergraduate tutors gain through our programs push open the door for each of them to a newly developing sense of self, a self with confidence earned by systematically “gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect” (Cronon 78).

By doing this crucial kind of assessment of tutor learning that we argue for in our PTWARD, writing centers can resituate themselves in the contemporary academy. Through systematic sponsorship of collaborative learning, writing centers not only help student writers improve, but also play a transformational role in helping student tutors advance their own liberal educations. Alumni research helps us gain a more complete understanding of the value of writing centers and gives us the language we need to transform institutional awareness of our educational purpose and significance.

Appendix A
The Current Version of the PWTARP Survey

Demographic Information:

Today's date:

What is your age?

What is your gender?

When did you graduate?

What was (were) your major(s)?

Have you pursued any additional education after graduation? Please specify degree(s) and institution(s). If you are currently a graduate student, please specify institution and degree.

How many *semesters or terms* did you tutor in the Writing Center?

Did you take a credit-bearing tutor training course as an undergraduate?

Yes No

Which other forms of tutor development did you participate in? (Please check all that apply.)

- none
- regular staff meetings
- regional or national conferences
- summer workshops
- social events
- other (please specify)

What occupation(s) have you pursued since graduation?

Reflections on Your Tutoring Experience:

1. What are the most significant abilities, values, or skills that you developed in your work as a peer writing tutor? Please list them.
2. Of the abilities, values, or skills that you listed above, would you illustrate those that strike you as most meaningful by sharing an episode or event that took place during your time as a tutor or a trainee?
3. Did those abilities, values, or skills that you developed as a peer tutor seem to be

a factor in your choice of job or graduate work? Would you elaborate?

4. Did these qualities seem to play a role in your interviewing, in the hiring process, or in acceptance to graduate school? How do you come to that conclusion?

Would you rate the importance of your training and/or experience as a tutor in the *interviewing or hiring process for your first job*?

5	4	3	2	1
Very influential				Not influential

5. Do any of the qualities you listed in question one play a role in your social or family relationships? Can you give an example?

6. In your occupations(s), have you used the qualities you developed as a writing tutor, if at all? Would you elaborate? Give an example?

Would you rank the importance *for your occupation* of the skills, qualities, or values you developed as a tutor?

5	4	3	2	1
Highly important				Unimportant

7. To what extent do you think your own writing has been influenced by your experience as a writing tutor? Please explain.

To what extent has *your writing* been influenced by your training and/or work as a tutor?

5	4	3	2	1
Very influenced				Not influenced

8. What have you learned from working with the writing of others? Please elaborate or provide an example.

9. Were there any downsides to your experience as a peer writing tutor? Please elaborate.

10. Would you please rate the importance of your writing center/writing fellow training and experience as you developed as a university student?

5	4	3	2	1
Highly important				Unimportant

Please explain your rating.

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