

Peer Tutoring: Through the eyes of the student tutor – The first Keynote Panel of Peer Tutors at the EATAW Conference 2011

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The European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) characterises itself as “a scholarly forum which seeks to bring together those involved or interested in the teaching, tutoring, research, administration and development of academic writing in higher education in Europe” (EATAW, date unknown). While EATAW Conferences are held every two years, the 2011 conference stood out by its special focus on the student experience which becomes apparent in the conference title: ‘The Role of the Student Experience in Shaping Academic Writing Development in Higher Education’.

Consequently, the idea of having a keynote panel of peer tutors at the EATAW Conference 2011 evolved out of the wish to emphasize this core interest in the student experience. Hence, in November 2010 a call for narratives written by groups of peer tutors was published announcing that “the Keynote Panel of Peer tutors will bring together a selection of peer tutors from across Europe to discuss how working as a peer tutor in writing has shaped, or is being shaped by, their student experience” (EATAW 2010). There were eleven submissions from writing centres all over Europe. In the end those selected came from the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) and Cologne University, both located in Germany, and from the University of Limerick in Ireland.

Each of the groups of tutors from these three universities then selected one peer tutor to take part in the keynote panel at the EATAW Conference in June/July 2011. These were Constanze Alpen from Cologne, Lisa Breford from Limerick and Simone Tschirpke from Frankfurt (Oder). In the following, two members of this group, Constanze Alpen and Lisa Breford, will give an overview of our keynote presentation at the EATAW Conference to provide an insight into the work of peer tutors.

For the keynote panel we set the main emphasis on the following questions: What does it mean to be a peer tutor? What influence has working as a peer tutor had on our own student experience? And what influence has it had on other students' experiences? Below, we have implemented these questions as subheadings.

Since we felt that the individual structures of our writing centres may also influence our experiences as peer tutors, we will begin by providing a short overview of each centre and any particularities it had in connection with activities, peer tutoring and peer tutor training.

Tab. 1: The writing centres (eigene Darstellung)

	Writing Skills Centre at Cologne University	Regional Writing Centre at the University of Limerick	Writing Centre of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder)
foundation	2007		
staff	7 staff members; 5 working as peer tutors	16 staff members; 13 working as peer tutors	14 staff members; 9 working as peer tutors
main focus and activities	one-to-one peer tutoring, seminars, writing groups and workshops, collaborations with lecturers		
specific focus of each centre	organization of series of lectures; contributions in English	staff development; teaching special modules in writing; providing online resources for staff and students	staff development; several projects with secondary schools
peer tutor training	detailed manual for different sections of work; one-day-introduction; writing in on the constitutions of the different peer tutors	tutor training differs for undergraduate and postgraduate students; postgraduates: taking part in one-day workshop + practical training; undergraduates: completion of full accredited module over one semester	four modules: 1. autonomous creative writing groups 2. peer-tutoring Seminar 3. intercultural training 4. practical training

Reading the description of the three centres it becomes apparent that they have a lot in common: All three set a clear focus on one-to-one tutoring, organise writing workshops and seminars and also offer services for academic staff. On the other hand, we also discovered some differences, especially with regard to our training. However, we felt that these did not have a major influence on our overall perception of our work as peer tutors and its influence on our student experience. Rather, we felt that similarities outweighed the differences which will also become apparent in the following, when we summarise the common points of our individual perspectives in the context of peer tutoring.

What does it mean to be a peer tutor?

The first task for us as a group was to determine what it means to be a peer tutor based on our own experiences. Peer tutoring involves many different aspects, as every student who comes to us has a unique writing issue. In order to be able to relate appropriately, one of the most important things is to be empathetic. This enables us as peer tutors to focus on the particular problems the student is having with regard to their work. Depending on the individual student, they may require strong encouragement in the form of a timeline to stop procrastinating, or they may need more detailed and ongoing support in order to build up their self-confidence.

With regard to the latter, but also more generally speaking, it is important that the students do not feel inferior to the person they are talking to. Many students do not approach their lecturers because they think they should know how to master academic writing alone. They fear that their questions may seem ridiculous. In addition, students shy away from asking the person who will grade their work for help. However, as we, the peer tutors do not give marks, being a peer tutor also means being at 'eye-level'. We give advice from our own experience and as a consequence, the students feel free to talk about their doubts. It is important that they are not anxious and that they feel free to ask any questions about academic writing. We, the peer tutors, need to provide an audience that gives them non-judgmental feedback. By asking the right questions, we aim to enable the students to identify on their own what their writing issues may be. In this way, they can review themselves whether the structure of their writing is logical and comprehensible.

Furthermore, a peer tutor acts as a mediator between the academic texts students have to read during their studies and the requirements of their own course work. Many academic texts are written in a very complex way and can be exhausting to follow, especially for a first year student. Yet, many students assume that they are expected to write in the same manner. Here, it is our task as peer tutors to explain that, first of all, texts need to be written in an understandable and comprehensible way.

Sometimes, our role as peer tutors is misunderstood as setting goals and providing ready solutions to the students. However, we feel that we only direct the students to the skills and tools which they need to overcome their difficulties on their own. Hence, one can also say that being a peer tutor means being a guide.

Another important aspect of being a peer tutor is being involved in the writing centre. We all work in teams with several peer tutors and regular exchange about our work within these groups has proven to be very beneficial. The team provides a forum to discuss difficulties or new tutoring methods, to give or receive advice or to plan new events, seminars or workshops based on individual team members' experiences. Overall, not only the tutors but also the students coming to our centres benefit from the additional energy that each tutor draws from regular team meetings and discussions. Apart from our responsibilities, another aspect of our work as peer tutors is the impact that it has had on our own student experience. This will be described in more detail in the following paragraph.

What influence has working as a peer tutor had on our own student experience?

When discussing the influence that working as a peer tutor has had on our own student experience, all three of us agreed that we felt a stronger connection with our universities and with academia. The reasons for this are manifold: Being part of the team of peer tutors and the writing centre provides us with a strong point of reference within the university instead of just being one student among many.

Through our work in the writing centre, we get to know a growing number of students as well as staff, which makes our lives as students less anonymous. Last year, for example, the peer tutors at the European University Viadrina organized an exhibition on the academic writing of lecturers and professors teaching at the university. They asked professors to write about their writing process, their joys, their challenges and their specific approaches. They displayed those texts along with photos of the lecturers' and professors' writing places in the main hall of the university. With this exhibition they wanted to demystify academic writing and show that writing is a process that can be enjoyable and that can be talked about.

The latter is also something we discovered for ourselves when working as peer tutors in our respective writing centres. Overall, working as a peer tutor has enabled us to further develop our writing techniques and abilities. This comprises knowing what constitutes a good paper and how to develop it, as well as being aware of the social aspect of writing. In addition, it involves looking for feedback from our peers and lecturers on a regular basis, while we progress through the different stages of the writing process. We also know which environment is the most productive for our writing. All of this has helped us to become better writers.

Overall, working as a peer tutor has also helped us to gain new self-confidence: First, we get a lot of positive feedback from the students visiting the centre. Second, this gives us new confidence in our own writing abilities. As a consequence, when feeling challenged by our own writing projects, we can draw on the experiences and insights that we gained as peer tutors and implement these within our own writing.

Apart from this, another point was specific to the University of Limerick. Here, those PhD students working as peer tutors in the writing centre also work as tutors for modules within their discipline. In this context, Lisa felt that having worked on a multitude of assignments with students in the writing centre made her more aware of the challenge of designing good essay questions. Overall, peer tutors can gain new insights into the students' perspectives on assignments. For the last point of our keynote, we were interested in the experiences of the students who come to visit our centres. We will address this in the following.

What influence does peer tutoring have on other students' experience?

From our experience, students in the writing centre feel accommodated and accepted with their difficulties. Issues raised comprise anything from questions of structure to problems with time management to writer's block. Students have told us that they are pleased to be able to ask questions without feeling anxious. Many of them appreciate that there are students at 'eye-level' who give useful advice, proposals or criticism which makes them better writers. As we are providing the students with the skills and techniques they require, they are imbued with the self-confidence to manage their writing difficulties on their own. During this process, students experience that writing is not a lonely process but a social one, and that sharing thoughts helps to recognize shortcomings and to find solutions.

Retrospection

The development of the keynote presentation provided several challenges. First of all, as we were all based in different locations, we only met for the first time in the evening before the presentation. Hence, the main parts of the presentation evolved in the form of a long-distance group project, based on oral communication via Skype, written communication via e-mail and collaborative writing using Dropbox to share our documents. Despite this unusual form of 'long-distance' group work, in the end we all felt that taking part in the keynote panel was a very valuable and enjoyable experience. Most of all, we gained new and detailed insights into the work of two other European writing centres, resulting in new ideas for our own peer tutoring work. During the weeks leading up to the conference we had already been involved in a regular and lively exchange about academic writing in general and peer tutoring in particular. In this respect, the keynote turned out to be a very good starting point for our participation in the conference as a whole.

As our presentation took place at the very beginning of the EATAW Conference, we felt that it provided a reference point throughout the event as presenters referred to the keynote's content in their own presentations on multiple occasions. For us, it was a completely new and positive experience to be known by all participants and our perspective being taken into account

by so many.

Overall, we believe that the initial aim of setting the theme for this conference through the keynote panel of peer tutors was definitely achieved. We feel that the regular inclusion of students as keynote speakers at conferences in the field of Teaching Academic Writing could send a strong message saying that the students' perspective is included and treated at 'eye-level'. In this context, the format of the presentation as a keynote is important as it reaches out to all participants of a conference.

An additional point, which came to our mind on the basis of our experience as members of an international keynote panel of peer tutors, relates to the communication amongst peer tutors in writing. Here, we feel that it would be highly beneficial if there were a network of peer tutors, providing a platform for communication and exchange across borders. This could enable a growing number of peer tutors to benefit from international contacts and initiate new learning processes similar to the one that came into existence during our work for this keynote panel.

References:

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Constanze Alpen is part of the team of the writing skills centre at the University of Cologne since 2009. There she works as a peer tutor for consultations and offers courses on academic writing for students with focus on arrangement and argument structure of academic papers. At the University of Cologne she studies modern and contemporary history, politics, German studies and Spanish.