Who Am I, and Who Should I Be? Three Perspectives on Peer Tutoring in Writing Outside the Writing Centre

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When we are engaged in peer tutoring in writing, we find ourselves adopting and switching between a variety of different roles and role aspects. Many of us have had the experience that the multiple roles we assume are not always compatible, which might result in role conflicts (Grieshammer et al. 2013: 265). The consciousness of the different roles that peer tutors adopt seem to play an increasingly important role in the training of peer writing tutors in Germany (e. g. SIG "Qualitätsstandards und Inhalte der Peer-Schreibtutor*innen-Ausbildung" 2016). However, peer tutoring in writing is not restricted to writing centres; it also occurs in other university settings, most notably in the classroom. In many university courses, students work collaboratively on texts and give each other feedback. Ideally, instructors should assume a guiding role in these processes. Consequently, teachers, teaching assistants and students alike are all actively involved in peer tutoring processes in the classroom.[1] However, unlike peer tutors in writing centres, usually none of them has received any systematic training which would raise an awareness of roles and potential role conflicts.

We, the authors, coming from the discipline of English Linguistics at the English department of the University of Bonn, have three different but interrelated perspectives as we hold three different socio-institutional roles in the university context (Grieshammer et al. 2013), namely that of student, teaching assistant and teacher. In 2017, we talked a lot about our experiences with peer learning, and we decided to present our reflections at the 10th Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (SPTK) in Cologne in 2017. The current article is a field report based on this presentation.

We will first illustrate the variety of roles and role aspects that we all assume in the context of peer writing tutoring, as well as the relationship between these different roles/role aspects. Secondly, we will share our experiences with role conflicts that may occur in peer tutoring processes outside of the writing centre. Thirdly, we will present possible ways to deal with role conflicts and address the opportunities they offer, and lastly, we will

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1   Please note that, in this article, the term *peer writing tutor* is not used to describe an institutionalised role or a job title, but to describe a subordinate function or role that all of us adopt as a part of our superordinate institutionalised roles. To avoid confusion with the institutionalised role of a peer (writing) tutor, the term *teaching assistant* is used here as a translation of the German "Fachtutor*in". Teaching assistants (Fachtutor*innen) at our department are B.A. or M.A. students who give course-accompanying tutorials to a group of undergraduate students, rather than offering one-on-one peer tutoring.

suggest steps towards institutional change that could be taken to enhance this type of peer learning in future classrooms.

The complexity of roles and role relationships

Sarah takes the *student* perspective, Inken the perspective of a *teaching assistant*, and Stefanie that of the *teacher*. Apart from these socio-institutional roles that we assume in the university context, we are also confronted with peer tutoring in other roles and settings.

Student

In the role of a *student*, Sarah participates in peer tutoring as a *course participant* and as a *fellow student*. She gives feedback to, and receives feedback from, her fellow students in dedicated classroom sessions as well as outside of the classroom, where fellow students may ask her for help with essays or term papers. Next to these roles, which all fall under the primary role *student*, Sarah also engages in peer writing tutoring in her private life as a *friend.* She helps her friends with text processing issues and proofreads their academic and non-academic texts. She also has experience as a *student representative*, representing her peers in university-related matters and engaging in one-on-one tutoring sessions to help them with organisational matters or papers and essays.

Teaching assistant

As a *teaching assistant,* Inken gives a course-accompanying tutorial, whose aim it is to prepare first-year students for writing their first term paper in linguistics. Teaching assistants equip the students with basic skills in academic writing, including the research and writing process, term paper structure, citing and referencing and academic language and style. In addition, the students receive support with developing their own research topic and question. In her role as *teaching assistant*, communication with the teacher as the head instructor is vital. Inken receives guidance from the teacher, and they give mutual feedback. Other roles Inken holds are those of *student* and *friend*, with very similar experiences to those reported by Sarah, and the role of a *mentor* for the students of the Master programme "Applied Linguistics". In this function, she provides support for current and prospective students and answers their questions on organisational matters, term paper guidelines, teacher expectations, etc. In her job as a student assistant at the Chair for Applied English Linguistics, she also gives feedback to other student assistants and receives feedback from them as a *colleague,* which represents yet another role in which she is confronted with peer feedback.

Teacher

As a university *teacher* in Applied English Linguistics, Stefanie's main responsibility in the context of peer writing tutoring is to facilitate this process in the classroom. This means that she discusses general feedback principles and techniques with her students and provides in-class and out-of-class opportunities for this type of peer learning. She also supervises tutors and helps them implement peer learning elements in their tutorial sessions. In her freelancing work as *writing consultant*, Stefanie provides textual feedback to her clients. Although this is not a peer tutoring situation in a narrow sense, the consultancy is based on the principle of non-directive tutoring on a level playing field. As part of her writing consultancy and other professional training as well as part of her role as a *colleague*, Stefanie also receives textual feedback from her peers and gives feedback on their texts. Similar to Sarah and Inken, Stefanie also does additional informal peer tutoring for her *friends*.

Figure 1
The complexity of role relationships (illustration by the authors)
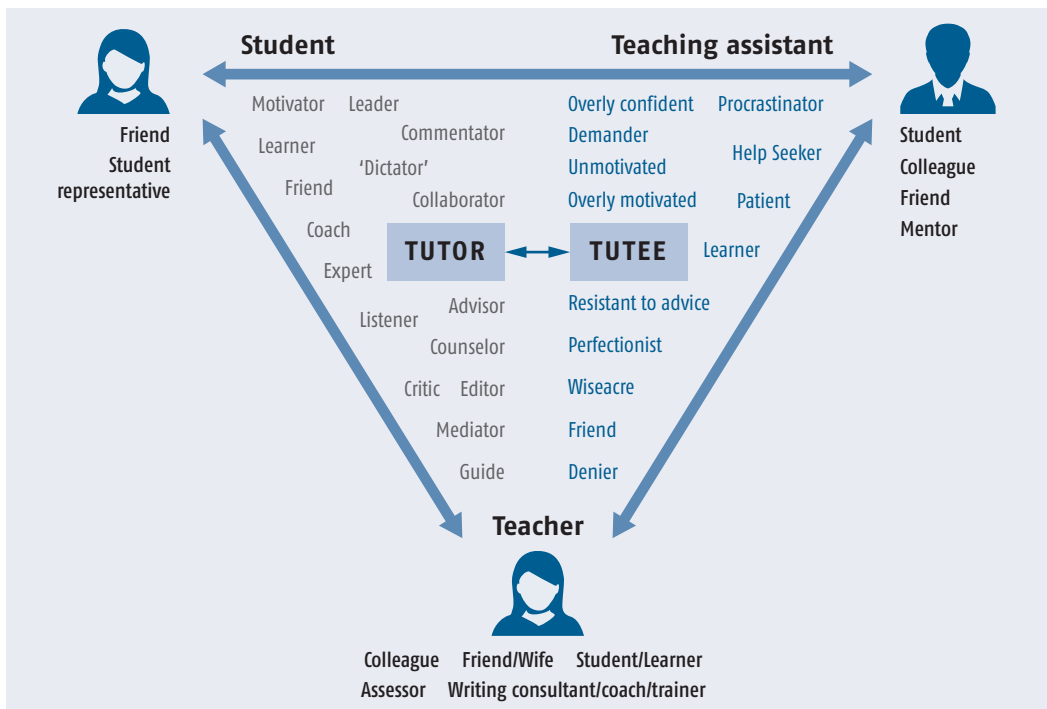
As these role descriptions illustrate, the structure of our roles and role relationships is highly complex. What makes it even more complex is that whenever we find ourselves in a peer tutoring situation, we can either be a *tutor* or a *tutee*. In these functions, we can assume a large variety of different role aspects. As a *tutor*, we might, for instance, assume

the role of 'a listener', 'a motivator', 'a coach', 'a critic' or 'a counsellor'. When receiving peer feedback as a *tutee*, we can be 'a help-seeker', 'a denier', 'a procrastinator', 'a perfectionist' or an 'overly motivated' person (see Figure 2; Grieshammer et al. 2013: 263; Ryan & Zimmerelli 2016: 5ff.).

This highly complex network of primary roles, secondary roles, role aspects and their interrelationships can lead to a variety of different role conflicts which we will outline next.

Our experiences with role conflicts

Grieshammer et al. (2013: 265 f.) mention three possible role conflicts that can occur in relation to the different roles and role aspects described above:

Conflict type 1: Being in between two conflicting socio-institutional roles

Conflict type 2: Different conflicting aspects within one role

Conflict type 3: Tutee's expectations of tutor's role incompatible with tutor's view of his or her role

(Grieshammer et al. 2013: 265; authors' translation)

Each of us have been confronted with these types of conflicts ourselves. In the following, we each present one concrete example for the role conflicts listed above.

Conflict type 1: Being in between two conflicting socio-institutional roles (teaching assistant)

The main conflict Inken has faced in tutorials is the conflict between her two socio-institutional roles fellow student and teaching assistant. As teaching assistant, Inken assumed the hierarchical role of an instructor. The students perceived her as the teacher in the classroom setting, especially those students who were confronted with tutorials as a course format for the first time at university. On the other hand, the students also knew that the teaching assistant was a fellow student, i.e. a peer. Consequently, one of the main challenges for a teaching assistant in tutorials is to maintain the authoritative role of the instructor while still remaining approachable as a peer.

The conflict described above was reflected in the behaviour of the students towards the teaching assistant. One example were students' emails to Inken which revealed widespread confusion over her role status. They employed various different forms of address and leave-taking formula and used a wide range of tones, ranging from the very informal "Liebe Inken" or "Liebe Grüße und ein schönes Wochenende", to very formal "Sehr geehrte Frau Mays" or "Mit freundlichen Grüßen". Some students even mixed formal and informal styles or avoided addressing Inken altogether (e.g. "Guten Abend"), suggesting that they

did not want to make a decision for either the formal "Sie" or the informal "Du". These cases mainly occurred in the beginning of the semester when the teaching assistant's role had not yet become clear. Similar occurrences at a later stage of the semester might be interpreted as the result of a miscommunication or a lack of communication about roles and role expectations between the teaching assistant and the students.

Conflict type 2: Different conflicting aspects within one role (student)

As part of a collaborative writing project in class, Sarah has experienced the second possible conflict: different conflicting aspects within one role. She was in her role as a student and had to provide feedback to her peers by filling out a feedback sheet. The problem occurred when she felt she should act as a *critic* and *neutral commentator*, but also that she should assume the role aspects of *mentor*, *friend* and *collaborator*. She has experienced what Grieshammer et al. (2013: 66) describe as a difference in directivity and/or proximity. She had to give constructive criticism, but also be motivating, supportive and friendly. Whenever she had to provide a negative assessment to her peers, be it in written or oral form, she used a lot of hedges and positive wording to lessen the impact of her critical comments, e.g. "This might be a problem" or "Some mistakes, which we discussed, but nothing major".

Conflict type 3: Tutee's expectations of tutor's role incompatible with tutor's view of his or her role (teacher)

During a classroom project with the aim of publishing students' texts online, Stefanie facilitated the peer review process among the course participants and also provided some textual feedback herself. This is where she was confronted with a role conflict of the third type: a mismatch between the tutor's expectation and the tutees' expectation of her role as a university *teacher*.

With her writing consultancy training in mind, Stefanie's initial expectation was to act as a 'quasi-peer' or coach with the intention of helping the students help themselves, i.e. to act on a level playing field and to make non-directive comments on the texts. She wanted the students to be active agents and autonomous writers, i.e. to understand that the responsibility for their texts was with them (Healy 1993). Therefore, the feedback comments included statements that expressed her understanding of the text (e.g. "I assume you mean…"), clarification questions (e.g. "Why bullet points here?") or indirect requests to change the text (e.g. "Can you reformulate this?").

However, in Stefanie's perception, based on students' reactions in class and the insufficient revision of the texts, this clashed with what the students had expected. She assumed that they were accustomed to a classical teacher role, including any power-related implications (Healy 1993), and expected that the teacher would explicitly tell them what was 'wrong' about their texts, making direct requests to change the texts in a specific way or directly correct (edit) them. When Stefanie realised that her feedback had not brought about the necessary revisions required to make the texts publishable, she decided to be

Sarah Lapacz, Inken Mays & Stefanie Pohle

more explicit and directive in the second round of teacher feedback; she now used impera-
tives and was less hesitant about directly editing the text (see also Fledderjohann 2017).
Obviously, she was wearing two seemingly incompatible hats at the same time: that of a
coach and that of an editor equipped with the authority of an expert. These are two of the
manifold roles of a course instructor that Thomann & Pawelleck (2013: 29 ff.) have identi-
fied.

As these examples show, the three possible conflicts mentioned by Grieshammer et al.
(2013) also occur in peer-writing tutoring outside of the writing centre. What conclusions
can we draw for peer tutoring situations in the classroom that we experience as part of
our various socio-institutional roles? How can we deal with role conflicts and even use
them to our advantage?

Role conflicts: Challenge and chance

We all agree that anyone who is involved in peer writing tutoring should be friendly, re-
spectful, open and capable of empathy and self-reflection. This requires that we foster
academic values such as honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (ICAI
2014) in all teaching and learning contexts at university, and that students, teaching assis-
tants and teachers alike are trained with these goals in mind. This is a two-sided process
of learning and practice: an inner process involving personal action, and an external pro-
cess offered by institutional support structures which facilitate the inner process.

This inner awareness process can be divided into four steps. First, those involved in
peer tutoring adopt a role (or several roles) unconsciously. In a second step, they observe
themselves and others before reflecting on, and becoming aware of, their role(s) in a third
step. Possible questions for reflection include: Which roles do I adopt in which situation?
How do I feel in this role? What are the expectations of the other person(s) involved?
Which conflicts arise, and how can I deal with them? Finally, the peer tutors should be
able to adopt different roles intentionally, to communicate their role expectations and to
handle any conflicts that may arise between roles (Grieshammer et al. 2013: 267; Antosch-
Bardohn 2016: 21 f.). In order to prepare peer tutors for this final, fourth step, they should
learn about possible methods and techniques (theory), be able to try them out in a safe
space (training) and finally practise them in real-life situations (practice).

Role conflicts can neither be denied nor avoided in an academic setting that is tradi-
tionally characterised by hierarchical power relations and differences in knowledge and
expertise. However, the conflicts can be unravelled and brought to the attention of those
involved (Grieshammer et al. 2013: 266 f.). More so, they can be seen as a chance for each
one of us
- to learn more about ourselves and our different roles,
- to realise and acknowledge the fluidity of role constellations,

- to further develop communicative and interpersonal competences and
- to acquire strategies that will help us negotiate our roles as well as manage and resolve conflicts in a variety of different situations within and beyond university.

Peer tutor training also offers the opportunity to critically reflect upon power relations in higher education institutions and, possibly, to question their underlying mechanisms (e. g. lack of open communication) and implications.

Our wish lists

To make the inner learning process and personal action possible, and to exploit the potential inherent in role conflicts, we believe that we need more institutional support. Some universities in Germany have already started to systematically implement this support, including Bonn University, but there is still room for improvement. As a conclusion to this article, we outline our call for change:

Student
Peer learning and tutoring is not yet an established form of learning and teaching in all university settings. Currently at our department, only a few course instructors facilitate peer feedback in the context of writing. Even if peer feedback is requested by a teacher, the feedback process is often not sufficiently discussed or taught. Therefore, Sarah as a student wishes that teachers provided more opportunities to engage in peer feedback in the classroom, that the process could be transparently explained and supervised, and that there could be more teaching elements focusing on (self-)reflection and awareness raising.

Teaching assistant
While peer writing tutors at the University Writing Lab ("Schreiblabor der Universität Bonn") are systematically prepared to work with their peers, in our experience, teaching assistants in the disciplines receive considerably less systematic training or institutionalised support. Currently, at our department, teaching assistants only receive guidance by course instructors to varying degrees, and it is the assistants' own responsibility to attend voluntary workshops offered by the Bonn Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning ("Bonner Zentrum für Hochschullehre" BZH) in cooperation with the Bonn University Writing Laboratory. In the future, Inken hopes for more support for teaching assistants through professional teaching staff and, ideally, a contact person to whom to turn in cases of conflicts. Mandatory and discipline-specific workshops and seminars (e. g. in cooperation with the Writing Laboratory) should be established. These measures would lead to the professionalisation of the teaching assistant role.

Sarah Lapacz, Inken Mays & Stefanie Pohle

Teacher

Teaching staff at Bonn University already benefit from optional workshops and certificate programmes offered by the Bonn Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning. Some of these programmes touch upon the topic of peer learning. Additionally, informal (peer) conferences with colleagues and mutual support are helpful. On Stefanie's wish list is the further professionalisation of the university teacher role(s) through more systematic training. The university should foster a teaching and learning culture where all teaching staff (lecturers, research assistants, professors) understand the benefit, necessity and joy of constantly learning about and testing innovative teaching concepts, including peer learning processes. They should also be given sufficient time to attend such workshops. The latter is inextricably tied to the fact that, unfortunately, research is often more highly valued than the craft of teaching at higher education institutions. As a result, the focus of most young researchers clearly is on their research career. One idea is to create monetary or, even better, contractual incentives for those who take part in the certificate programmes and successfully implement what they have learned in their classes. Stefanie also hopes for a dedicated contact person for specific questions and conflict situations.

One final wish is more inter-institutional cooperation (e. g. between departments and the university library or the writing centre), i. e. a cooperation that does not primarily rely on personal contacts between individual staff members.

In this article we have tried to elucidate the different roles, role aspects and role constellations that characterise peer writing tutoring in a higher education context. We showed that peer writing tutoring does not only happen in writing centres, but also in the classroom, among colleagues at work as well as in students' and teachers' private lives.

We also hope that our field report will be an incentive for a re-evaluation of the current situation of peer writing processes outside the writing centre at German universities. Our ideas and suggestions for institutional change can be seen as a starting point for a constructive discussion of the topic with the aim to provide support mechanisms for all parties involved, at our own institution and beyond. A closer cooperation between teachers in the disciplines and writing centres could be a productive first step in this direction.

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