



Training of Writing Tutors: Lacks and Needs

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Abstract

Every writer needs preliminary readers, and careful responses and questions such readers provide. Writing center tutors are those readers and they need to be equipped with particular features to achieve the goals of writing centers. In order to train effective tutors and to better cater for the needs of writers, many writing centers have initiated tutor-training programs. The graduate Academic Writing Center (AWC) in this study has been in service for almost 16 years. Novice English language instructors start working at the Center every semester mostly without knowing what is exactly done in the Center, and thus, they need training. The training of new tutors is conducted through a set of training documents; however, in these documents, there is not much reference to what needs to be done during actual instruction time in a tutorial, and thus, tutors frequently voice the need to receive more guidance to better deal with the problems they face during the tutorial sessions and to enhance their current tutoring practices. This study aims to fill the gap in the tutor training practice of the AWC by exploring the needs of the tutors, the difficulties experienced while tutoring, the lacks of the current training session, and tutors' views regarding an ideal tutor training program.

Keywords: Academic writing, writing tutors, writing centers, tutor training

1. Introduction

A writing center is a facility where writers of all kinds can come for an individualized writing conference with a knowledgeable tutor (Clark, 1992). The supportive, one-on-one learning environment of the writing center can provide important assistance to writers who have different backgrounds and who work on papers at different stages of the writing process. The overall goal of writing centers is to offer writing instruction so that students at all levels can improve their writing skills and become self-sufficient (North, 1984; Brufee, 1980; Hawkins, 1984). Runciman (1990) stresses that writing centers are for all writers, and even the best writers need readers who give careful responses and ask well-thought questions. According to Harris (2006), tutors collaborate with writers in ways that help them find their own answers.

With the aim of training effective tutors and to better cater for the needs of the writers, many writing centers have initiated tutor-training programs which are "institutionally-specific with individual identities" (Hays, 2006, p. 47). The review of the literature reveals that the common aim of almost all training activities is to promote a student-centered mode of writing instruction and critical thinking skills (Rogers, 2008).

In Turkey, there are numerous English medium universities, which require students and scholars to write and publish their academic work in English. In some of these universities, writing centers have been established to help students improve their writing skills. The graduate Academic Writing Center (AWC) in this study has been providing tutoring service to the university community to guide writers throughout the process of writing academic papers and to improve their writing skills. Both experienced and novice instructors from the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) work at the Center on a voluntary basis. Every semester, one or two new tutors consider working at the Center. Since they come to the Center most of the time without knowing exactly what is going on in the Center and what exactly is done in the Center, they need training before they start tutoring the academic community of the university.

The training of new tutors at the AWC is conducted through a set of training documents prepared to introduce the new tutors the philosophy of the Center, the minimalist tutoring concept, and the stages of a tutorial. The training documents also include excerpts from a tutorial and discussion on them, discussion on one page from an actual student thesis, tutor job description, and logistics and practical matters.

The tutor training session is given to the new instructors at the beginning of the semester before they start tutoring. The training session takes about one hour. New tutors generally want to have the copies of handouts on the types of writing the Center deals with such as journal articles, research papers,

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and proposals. They say they would like to review those handouts since they want to better cater for the needs of the writers or they want to be able to answer the possible questions a writer may ask.

1.1 Aim of the study and research questions

As stated earlier, the tutor training session at the AWC is given to new tutors at the beginning of the semester in less than an hour, and no other training activities are conducted throughout the academic year. The training process is over when one of the coordinators goes over the documents with the new tutor. Tutors are given brief information about how to start and end a tutorial session. There is not much reference to what needs to be done during actual instruction time in a tutorial. The analysis of excerpts from a tutorial gives an idea to the new tutors to some extent, but it, at the same time, increases the anxiety of new tutors. To be more precise, new tutors are left in a “sink or swim” situation. Not much time is devoted to training tutors about how to tutor, and during personal communication with the coordinators, tutors frequently voice the need to receive more guidance to better deal with the problems they face during the tutorial session and to enhance their current tutoring practices whose quality they are not sure of. Needless to say, training tutors in how to teach, give feedback, and respond appears to be overlooked in the current tutor-training program of the AWC. Tutor training, support and monitoring are essential for a successful outcome in the writing center (Wasik, 1997). Therefore, the present study aims to fill the gap in the tutor training practice of the AWC by exploring the needs of the tutors, the difficulties experienced while tutoring, the lacks of the current training session, and tutors' views regarding an ideal tutor training program.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

To reveal the needs of the tutors, the difficulties experienced while tutoring, the lacks of the current training session, and tutors' views regarding an ideal tutor training program, in-depth semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with five new tutors, who started tutoring in the AWC during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 academic years. Tutors were asked to express their opinions about the points defined above. Following the transcription stage, the data was simplified and organized through coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, conclusions were drawn based on the reduced data.

3. Findings

3.1 Lacks, difficulties and needs

According to the findings of the study, the majority of the tutors believe that the current training session does not prepare them well enough to conduct good tutorial sessions and does not alleviate their anxieties. For them, it is almost impossible to understand the true nature of a tutorial by studying the written training documents. As stated by one of the tutors:

“I was so nervous just before the first tutorial session because I was afraid of not being able to answer the questions of the student. I completed my Master's degree and I have written many assignments and a thesis myself, but still I felt nervous before working with someone from another discipline”.

As understood from this quotation, new tutors feel anxious particularly before the first tutorial session and particularly when they are scheduled to work with a student whose discipline is very different from their own field. For instance, as graduates of English Language Teaching departments, the tutors in the study frequently mentioned how anxious they feel when they work with an engineering student.

They say that sometimes they understand nothing from what the students has written because of the technical terms and procedures mentioned in the paper, and thus, they focus merely on grammar, which is not the initial aim of the AWC.

Furthermore, three tutors in the study mentioned that they are not knowledgeable in recent academic conventions. Thus, when students ask a specific question about academic writing like the APA Style, they may not be able to answer the questions properly, which causes them to feel inefficient as a tutor. Thus, they believe that they need training in this respect as well. In connection with this lack and need, the tutors in the study stated that they do not know which resources they can recommend to the students so that they can learn more about academic writing or the constituents of it. As one tutor said:

“One student wanted me to recommend her a book so that she can improve her knowledge in academic writing conventions, but as I do not know the name of any resources, I could not make any recommendations, and I felt so bad”.



As the above quotation reveals, the tutors want to learn more about some valuable resources and materials they can recommend to students or they can use themselves. Although the AWC provides some materials and handouts to the tutors and students, tutors say that they do not exactly know which materials and handouts are available in the Center.

Last but not least, all the tutors in the study believe that with the current system of training, they are confronted with a sink or swim situation. They highlight the importance of developing a well-designed tutor training program in order to enhance their tutoring practices.

3.2 Views regarding an ideal training program

When asked about their views regarding an effective tutor training program, the tutors stated what components a tutor training program should include to better equip them with the necessary skills for satisfactory tutorial sessions.

First, they believe that a tutor training program should definitely include direct instruction. A tutor training file, which includes reference materials incorporating information regarding the conventions of academic writing, samples of student writing, procedures for giving feedback on higher-order and lower-order concerns in an academic paper, could be distributed to the new tutors and through weekly meetings, the materials in the file could be studied exchanging ideas and linking the theory to practice. Some of these weekly meetings may specifically involve discussions on difficulties encountered during the tutorial sessions and the ways to deal with them. The direct instruction component of the training program may also involve familiarizing the new tutors with some valuable resource books on academic writing, which they can also recommend to the students, and some seminal articles on tutoring and feedback procedures. The tutors pointed out that the direct instruction component of the training program must be conducted in such a consistent and continual manner that tutors must understand the importance of the job they are doing and they must be awarded a certificate of attendance upon completing the program.

Secondly, the tutors suggested involving an observation component in the program. They stated that not only at the beginning of the tutoring experience but also throughout the semester, observation sessions must be scheduled for the new tutors. In this way, they have the chance to observe the experienced tutors, learn from them, and find answers to their questions related to the tutoring process. They further believe that new tutors must be given the opportunity to observe as many tutorial sessions as they want until they feel ready to conduct a session themselves.

Thirdly, three tutors suggested video recording the sessions they conduct. These recorded sessions may then be shown during the meetings and a discussion may be initiated as to what went well and what needs to be improved. Discussions may also involve what other tutors do in similar situations and what they learned by watching the particular video.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the tutors in the study believe that direct instruction should be made a major component of a training program. Pugh (1983) also suggests that "much of the theoretical and practical information about the student as learner, understanding the literacy processes, strategies for helping learning and resource materials is received by the tutor through direct instruction, demonstration and anecdotal description by the tutor-trainer or in printed matter" (p. 130).

Furthermore, as suggested by the tutors in the present study, observation must be one of the tutor training methods in the AWC. This suggestion is supported by the study of Bell (2005), who describes observation as a "collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support" (p.3). He discusses several benefits of observation in tutor development, which are improving teaching practices, building confidence to teach and learn more about teaching practices, allowing the sharing of ideas, and promoting feedback and reflection on understandings, feelings, and actions.

As to the suggestion on videotaping tutorial sessions and having discussions on them, Hays (2006) mentions a training method called reflective practice, in which tutors think and talk about the meaning of their practice and the tutoring process with the help of journal entries and the audiotaped and/or videotaped tutoring sessions.

There are many other research studies conducted on writing center tutor training programs mainly in American colleges and universities. As far as Turkey is concerned, there are no studies on tutor training practices, let alone tutor training program evaluation or design. Thus, the current study sets out to fill the gap in tutor training design in writing center literature.



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