

Writing Center Tutor Journeys

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Writing centers have become increasingly popular on university campuses in Japan. There are at least 13 writing centers located throughout the country (The Writing Centers Association of Japan, n.d.). These writing centers are all slightly different, but they share a common goal of improving student writing in the target language. Depending on the needs of the institution, writing centers may be staffed by faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, or international students. This type of collaboration leads to both student and tutor learning and development. The present study aims to discover what international student tutors learned through their experiences tutoring in a writing center at a foreign language university in Japan.

The effects of peer tutoring on writing center tutors

The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project (PWTARP) is a survey research project designed to study what peer tutors learn from their writing center tutoring experiences (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2017). The original researchers, Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail (2010), found that undergraduate tutors who had worked in writing centers in the United States gained a variety of skills and abilities from tutoring. Responses from 126 former tutors from three different writing centers pointed to the usefulness of these skills and abilities in their current professional and personal lives. The results of their research show that “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 relationships; earned confidence in themselves; and a deeper understanding of and commitment to collaborative learning” (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010).

The PWTARP is designed to be adapted and used by other researchers and research has been replicated at various universities throughout the United States. Dinitz and Kiedaisch (2009) at the University of Vermont found that peer tutors developed communication skills, writing skills, teaching skills, and cognitive skills from working at the writing center. Zucker and Evertz (in Hughes, 2011) discovered that peer tutor alumni emphasized the development of communication and collaboration skills from their writing center work.

Research on the effects of peer tutoring on tutors has been primarily conducted in the United States. This research investigates the effects of peer tutoring on international students who tutored Japanese students in a university writing center in Japan. The purpose of this study is to investigate two research questions:

1. How much do tutors feel they improved certain skills and abilities by tutoring in the writing center at a Japanese foreign language university?
2. How much do tutors feel the experience of tutoring in the writing center at a Japanese foreign language university affected their future work or study plans?

Method

Participants

The participants were international undergraduate students who have worked as tutors in the writing center at a Japanese foreign language university. The tutoring staff members were students studying Japanese language and culture for

one or two semesters at the university. They came from home universities in countries all over the world, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Philippines, Argentina, and Singapore. The tutors had a variety of majors, interests, experiences, and backgrounds. The writing center assisted Japanese undergraduate students who were completing writing assignments in English for language or content courses. Japanese students could also receive guidance for internship applications, study abroad applications, and job interviews. Each semester, approximately 1000 tutoring sessions were conducted. Although most of the writing center tutors' time was spent tutoring students individually or in small groups, some tutors performed other tasks, such as assisting with workshops, materials development, and the training of new tutors.

Instrument

The Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project Survey (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010) was adapted to fit the context of the study (see Appendix). It is a combination of Likert-scale responses and open-ended questions. In May 2015, electronic surveys were sent to 50 writing center tutor alumni from 2012-2014 and 27 responses were received (54% response rate). The tutors had worked in the writing center for one or two semesters. At the time of completing the survey, some former tutors were still enrolled at their home universities, but some had graduated and were in graduate school or the workforce.

Results

Research question 1: How much do tutors feel they improved certain skills and abilities by tutoring in the writing center at a Japanese foreign language university?

The first question asked participants to rate from 1 (not improved) to 5 (greatly improved) how much working in the writing center helped them to improve a variety of skills and abilities. The items with the highest means were intercultural communication skills (4.48) and the ability to analyze writing (4.37). The means for other items were as follows: confidence (4.07), knowledge of grammar, mechanics, and documentation (4.04), patience (3.96), and interest in teaching or tutoring (3.89), writing skills (3.67), and social or personal life (3.59). The two items with the lowest means were job application skills (3.48), and public speaking skills (3.30). The results are listed below in Table 1.

The two skills that were rated the highest for improvement were intercultural communication skills (4.48) and the ability to analyze writing (4.37). A possible explanation for higher means in these skills is that tutors would likely use these skills during every shift at the writing center. All tutors were international students and almost all tutees were Japanese students, so tutoring sessions provided the opportunity for intercultural communication. Furthermore, because writing center tutors and supervisors came from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, communication between staff members also provided a chance to develop skills in this area. Regarding the ability to analyze writing, the main activity for writing center tutors was to consult with students individually and assist them with improving their writing assignments. As a result, tutors had the opportunity to analyze student writing during each shift.

The two skills that were rated the lowest for improvement were job application skills and public speaking skills. One possible explanation for lower means of these skills is that not all writing center tutors engaged in activities that might have provided them with clear opportunities to improve these skills. The service of assisting Japanese students with job application and interviews did not begin at the same time the writing center opened, but two years later in 2014, with only certain tutors specializing in this area. Fewer tutors engaged in this writing center activity. Regarding public speaking skills, a likely explanation can be found in the percentage of tutors who engaged in activities that would have helped them to develop in this area. According to question two on the survey, "How much did these writing center activities help you improve these skills and abilities?", 15 of the 27 respondents did not give a writing center tour or presentation to groups of students, nor did they participate in the presentation event (a semesterly public speaking event where international students gave presentations in Japanese and Japanese students gave presentations in English). Furthermore, 20 of the 27 respondents

did not give a presentation about the writing center to faculty or at a professional conference. Therefore, most tutors did not engage in writing center activities related to public speaking, and this skill was rated the lowest in terms of improvement.

Table 1. Mean for how much working in the writing center helped tutors to improve the following skills and abilities

Skills and abilities	Mean (n=27)
Intercultural communication skills	4.48
Ability to analyze writing	4.37
Confidence	4.07
Knowledge of grammar, mechanics & documentation	4.04
Patience	3.96
Interest in teaching or tutoring	3.89
Writing skills	3.67
Social or personal life	3.59
Job application skills	3.48
Public speaking skills	3.30

Research question 2: How much do tutors feel the experience of tutoring in the writing center at a Japanese foreign language university affected their future work or study plans?

Question 6 asked former tutors to rate from how much their experiences as a tutor affected their choice of future work or study. The scale ranged from 1 (did not influence my choice of future study or work) to 5 (greatly influenced my choice of future study or work). There were 24 responses received and the mean was 2.71. Student comments indicate that the writing center experience did not change their future professional or educational goals, but rather deepened their commitment and understanding of their plans.

Sample student answers to Question 7, “Please explain your ranking for number 6. What jobs or educational experiences have you pursued? Why have you pursued these since finishing your tutoring experience?” give insight into this ranking. Two former tutors who are pursuing careers in education answered that the experience of working in the writing center deepened their interest in their already chosen professions. One respondent wrote, “I intend to become a professor of Japanese. I had intended this prior to working at the writing center, but tutoring there proved to me that I feel most fulfilled when I am teaching.” Another said, “I got to learn about a different aspect of linguistics, ESL and applied linguistics. This, in turn, was able to help me select what field of linguistics I wish to study.”

Two former tutors who are employed in areas outside of education gave the following explanations. One wrote, “Since being a tutor, I have since gone into the field of mental healthcare. I currently work as the team leader for a program that provides direct care for children 6-12 with significantly behavioral issues and trauma. While not directly related, my tutoring experience taught me that I was happiest when working one on one, when I can teach different skills, and when I am doing work that makes a significant impact.” Another responded, “My major is Japanese Language and Culture, my work experience is primarily in web, photography, videography, and marketing. I'm currently doing the latter employed at my alma mater as the staff Web Developer. If anything, it has given me a better sense of how to train and assist others in

learning new things, such as helping new student workers.” Although some former tutors do not work in areas related to teaching, they perceive the skills and abilities that they learned from tutoring as valuable in their current work environment.

Discussion

This study has several limitations. The first limitation is related to the participants. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and former tutors who had good experiences as tutors were probably more likely to complete the survey, and this may positively affect the results. Furthermore, the relatively small number of participants limits the generalizability of the results. The second limitation is related to the survey design. Former tutors are asked to rate how much they feel they have improved their skills and abilities from working in the writing center. This is subjective with participants basing their answers on their own frame of reference.

Despite these limitations, the study did provide insight into the writing center tutor experience which was useful at the university level. Tutor comments point to the benefits of working in this writing center. The international student tutors can have experiences that they otherwise would not be able to have during study abroad. One tutor stated, “I think it was one of my more positive experiences in Japan as it let me connect with faculty whom I never met, international students I may not have known, and allowed me to help others learn my language while they were helping me learn theirs.” Another tutor said, “There are so many things a Japanese person will write about themselves, their country, and their culture in a class assignment that they would never discuss in casual conversation. Working at the writing center taught me so much about Japanese culture from an insider's perspective that I couldn't have gotten any other way.”

Studies that continue to investigate writing centers as places of learning for not only students but also tutors will be important additions to the growing body of writing center research in Japan.

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Appendix

Writing Center Tutor Survey Adapted from Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project Survey (Hughes, Gillespie, & Kail, 2010)

1. How much did working in the Writing Center help you to improve the following? Rate from 1 (not improved) to 5 (strongly improved).

Confidence

Intercultural communication

Ability to analyze writing errors and patterns

Patience

Interest in teaching or tutoring
Social or personal life (meeting new people, developing new friendships, etc.)
Job application skills
Public speaking skills
Writing skills
Knowledge of grammar, mechanics, documentation, etc.

2. How much did these Writing Center activities help you to improve these skills and abilities? Rate from 1 (not improved) to 5 (strongly improved).

Tutoring students individually
Tutoring students in small groups
Assisting with workshops
Giving tours or presentations about the Writing Center for groups of students
Delivering presentations to faculty or at professional conferences
Working or presenting at the Presentation Event
Developing writing center materials (handbooks, guides, presentations, etc.)
Training new staff members

3. Please relate a memorable or valuable experience you had while working as a tutor in the Writing Center.
4. How did your Writing Center tutoring experience affect your study abroad experience? Rate from 1 (not improved) to 5 (strongly improved).
5. Please explain your ranking for number 4. How did working in the Writing Center affect your study abroad experience?
6. How much did your experience as a tutor affect your choice of work or study after finishing your study abroad? Rate from 1 (not improved) to 5 (strongly improved).
7. Please explain your ranking for number 6. What jobs or educational experiences have you pursued? Why have you pursued these since finishing your tutoring experience?
8. If there is anything else you would like to add about your experience as a writing center tutor that was not included in this survey, please add your comments below.

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