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Theory In/To Practice: Multilingual Tutors Supporting Multilingual Peers: A Peer-Tutor Training Course in the Arabian Gulf

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by Lynne Ronesi

About the Author

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Introduction

While writing centers and writing fellows programs have been integral components of many colleges and universities in North America, these models of student-to-student learning are starting to develop in postsecondary institutions in other parts of the world, particularly in the Arabian Gulf. Highlighting recent international interest in such initiatives was the first Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance Symposium held in Qatar in October 2007, an event attended by over fifty educators from the Middle East, and this group's subsequent status as a regional affiliate of the International Writing Centers Association. As peer-tutoring initiatives begin to span the globe, peer-tutor trainers have the benefit of three decades of training literature, which has sprung largely, if not entirely, from North America. Yet peer-tutor trainers abroad are challenged to fashion training programs to suit the unique local

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needs, as training literature has yet to address contexts outside North America. Indeed, the few articles that describe writing tutoring outside North America dismiss peer tutoring as inappropriate for their contexts. Adam Turner, director of a university writing center in Korea, points out that "in Korean culture, which is strongly influenced by Confucianism, age differences of even a year must be respected, which makes a peer model of interaction more difficult to implement" (par. 8). John Harbord at Central European University argues that curricular demands at his graduate university require a teacher/tutor model, where the tutor—a faculty member—has expertise in the genre of writing required of the student (3). These authors make effective arguments for their contexts, yet there are a growing number of international universities with writing centers that depend on peer-tutor support. One such university is the American University of Sharjah (AUS), which, when I first arrived in 2005, already had a thriving student-staffed writing center, with tutors trained "on the job." Moreover, during the same academic year, AUS established a peer-staffed writing fellows program. In view of the growing importance peer tutoring was taking at AUS—and with the support of the Writing Department Chair and the Writing Center Director—I proposed teaching a three-credit, semester-long writing tutor training course, which has since become a part of AUS curriculum. In this article, I first describe the specific context in which my class arose and then delineate the ways in which it both enacts and revises the pedagogies of one-to-one tutoring that have developed in North America.

Context

Founded in 1997, the American University of Sharjah (AUS) is a co-educational university accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Many of its international faculty members have earned their terminal degrees from North American institutions. Yet the AUS student body of roughly 5200 is comprised of nearly eighty nationalities with most students coming from the Gulf region, the Levant, and the Indian subcontinent. Many of these students reside with their families in the

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United Arab Emirates (UAE), as the UAE relies on an expatriate labor force due to the small number of Emiratis. Whether they have grown up in the UAE or elected to leave their countries to attend AUS, most AUS students do not speak English as a mother tongue. Additionally, about half the student body did not attend English-medium secondary schools but learned English as a foreign language requirement. The other half was educated in British, American, Indian, or Pakistani schools where English is the medium of instruction. Generally, students who have both the interest and writing skills to work as tutors in the AUS Writing Center or Writing Fellows program come from this category. It is fair to say that the range of writing skills at AUS is wide, with some students who write as well as or better than many native speakers of English. Nonetheless, the writing skills of numerous AUS students demonstrate issues associated with English as a second language writing; these commonly include weak vocabulary and syntax, confusing rhetorical patterns, and lack of sophistication about the conventions of source-based writing. Yet nearly all AUS students, regardless of the medium in which they have been educated or the level of their writing skills, share a common strength: their cultural diversity. They are multicultural and multilingual, and often multidialectal; many students have resided in different countries, traveled with their families, formed cross-cultural friendships and been raised in diverse communities. As one of my tutor trainees recently wrote: "[In the UAE] a person may be an African and have a Syrian boss, an American colleague, a German client, a Malaysian doctor, and a Pakistani friend." The AUS Writing Center Director has observed that "the tutors are familiar with the multitude of intersecting cultures such as Arabic, Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, African and European that are found in the UAE" (Eleftheriou 7). Among AUS students, diversity is the norm, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the mixture of nationalities represented in any AUS class.

In spring 2006, the semester before my proposed peer-tutor training class would start, I watched as the names on the class roster appeared during the pre-registration period: three Emirati students, one Indian, one Bangladeshi, one Bahrani, and one American student. With the new luxury of a credit-bearing, semester-

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long course, I wanted to create a training environment in which the tutors understood themselves and the students they would support as beneficiaries of a rich linguistic and cultural community. I wanted a training class that honored and celebrated our unique place in the realm of peer tutoring in writing—that of multilingual tutors supporting their multilingual peers in an English-medium university in an Arab country. Moreover, I agreed with the advice of my colleague, Maria Eleftheriou, the AUS Writing Center Director, that "tutors should avoid making assumptions about what students need based primarily on writing centre models that do not take into account a Middle-Eastern context" (8). I realized that I needed to make the students aware from the start that AUS tutoring issues would be somewhat different from those treated in the current canon of peer-tutoring scholarship. In addition to highlighting linguistic differences, the training course, subsequently, would also need to address the different cultural norms of North America and Sharjah. Sharjah, where AUS is located, is a conservative emirate in the United Arab Emirates, a Muslim country. Certainly, in Western universities, an issue like gender dynamics impacts tutoring sessions, but at AUS, in view of cultural norms in the region—as well as the cultural variations found in a student population of 80-plus nationalities—gender issues are rather different, more various, and even more sensitive than in many North American institutions. In many parts of the East, and in the Arab world in particular, gender boundaries are often very distinct, and contact between unrelated men and women is strictly regulated. Indeed, many AUS students attended single-sex secondary schools and feel uneasy, at least initially, interacting with students of the opposite gender. Further complicating tutorials is the variety of cultural notions about what ideas can be discussed and how they are appropriately expressed across genders. As one male Lebanese tutor trainee remarked, "My culture teaches me to speak gently with women, to avoid delivering bad news, and if that is unavoidable, to deliver it in the mildest way possible." Yet to understand the AUS context truly, it is also important to keep in mind that significant numbers of AUS students have experience in different parts of the world and are used to negotiating both liberal and conservative contexts. Therefore, the scope of communication

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ease and abilities is vast and complex. As I considered the design of the course, it seemed a monumental task to reconcile the unique linguistic and cultural needs of AUS peer tutoring in writing with the available scholarship.

In what might be perceived as a twist of irony, a return to peer-tutoring scholarship provided direction on how to deal with its limitations. While the canon is, obviously and understandably, US-centric, it is also student-oriented and practical. A discernable thread in the scholarship has been an acknowledgement that tutors should play an active role in complicating and extending writing center theory and practice. Since Harvey Kail's observation "that tutors were, in turn, teaching [him] how to be a peer-tutor trainer" (598), the concept that tutors and tutors-in-training could re-interpret frameworks, re-cast entrenched notions, and, subsequently, drive their own learning has been re-explored repeatedly (Dinitz and Kiedaisch 64; Geller et al. 48; Harris, "Using" 301; Vandenburg 63). This notion suggested that, with my facilitation and guidance from relevant peer-tutoring scholarship, I could rely on the students' experience—as students at AUS, as multilingual and multicultural individuals, as writers, as students who have sought writing support at the writing center, as students who would observe peer tutorials, and, for some, as tutors at the writing center—to establish a body of local understanding that would serve our purposes. This approach would encourage the students to view their training in a pioneering fashion in which the onus would be on them to provide missing information that would support their learning. The students I would train should understand that while their readings would highlight important and helpful landmarks in the tutoring terrain, it was incumbent on them and their classmates to share their local knowledge to navigate the more unique features in the landscape. This approach would require that I provide students enough time and space in the course for open class discussion that might meander and highlight new points that require attention, as Muriel Harris suggests ("Using" 302).

Another useful thread in writing center literature that has steadily gained in prominence addresses issues of race and culture in tutorials (Geller et al. 96; Kilborn 7; Mosher, Granroth, and Hicks 1; Severino 1). Certainly, Severino's reference to Pratt's "contact zone"

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and Anzaldua's "borderlands" as "excellent heuristics for analyzing writing center work" (1) spoke directly to our context and suggested an overall theme for our training work. Supporting that theme, Geller et al. suggest "honor[ing] the multivocality inherent in writing center work. . . . [by] including readings by scholars of color . . . to enhance and complicate the work of white scholars" (97). In the case of this peer-tutoring class, it seemed imperative to include readings by non-native speakers of English that offered different perspectives on English writing. I decided that a few such readings should "kick-off" our semester and help ground our initial discussions as a class on the issues surrounding multilingualism and multiculturalism.

With these notions in mind, I wrote my syllabus with the intent of clarifying to trainees at the outset their distinctive place in the realm of peer tutoring in writing as multilingual tutors supporting their multilingual peers in an English-medium university in an Arab country. As the course description in the syllabus on the following pages indicates, students begin the semester by examining themselves—and through themselves, the peers they will eventually tutor—as multilingual and multicultural writers. Readings by multilingual and multidialectal authors on English and writing prompt written reflection—and most importantly, class discussion—on their own linguistic circumstances. As regards class discussion, the topic of class participation appears in the syllabus as the first "Performance Assessment," and the course emphasis on verbal participation is explained thoroughly. Thus acquainted with the need for sharing experience and insights, students spend the first weeks of class examining and discussing their linguistic situations and those highlighted in their readings. These discussions elicit the vocabulary for and understanding of notions like additive and subtractive bilingualism and code switching as well as prestige, status, and identity with regard to first and second language use. For the students, these new concepts are issues they encounter every day, even if, until then, unknowingly. This work segues into a theme on the role of culture in writing where trainees encounter subjects such as contrastive rhetoric, World Englishes, plagiarism, and resistance. This exposure heightens their awareness about the basis of many students' writing issues.

After the trainees become accustomed to reflecting on their course content in terms of the question "How do these notions apply to our experiences as multilingual and multicultural students at AUS?" the course becomes more writing- and tutoring-oriented, giving way to an exploration of how writers write, why talking is helpful to writing, and finally, how to best talk about writing with students. During these weeks, students are asked to observe writing center and writing fellow sessions to provide a broader basis against which to appraise their readings; in short, this requirement provides the opportunity for weekly class discussion highlighting how actual practice at AUS informs their readings, and how their readings inform their understanding of actual practice. At the same time, students start planning their research papers. This project provides students an opportunity to further explore a subject that has caught their interest, or, in some cases, a chance to investigate a topic — often unique to the AUS context—that neither readings nor class discussion has covered. As students present on these topics, they end the semester with the benefit of yet more local knowledge.

The following peer-tutor training syllabus for WRI 221: Peer Tutoring in Writing has evolved over five semesters with the input of 55 students.

Primary Document

American University of Sharjah
Department of Writing Studies
WRI 221: Peer Tutoring in Writing

Course Description

WRI 221: Peer Tutoring in Writing trains talented writers for roles as Writing Center Tutors or Writing Fellows. Contributing to each other's learning in group work and class discussion is crucial to the course. In the first weeks, class members explore issues of writing in a second language as well their own and different writers' approaches towards writing. The latter half of WRI 221 is more "hands-on" in nature; students observe and then conduct Writing Center or Writing Fellow sessions, give class presentations, and comment on sample papers. WRI 221 is divided into the following thematic questions over the course of the semester:

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- Who am I as a writer in English?
- How does culture affect writing?
- How do writers write?
- Why talk about writing?
- How do we talk about writing?

Course Objectives

This course is designed to help WRI 221 students
- understand themselves and their peers as multicultural and multilingual writers.
- develop a deeper understanding of the writing process.
- become familiar with and think critically about writing and peer-tutoring issues and theories.
- consider how such issues and theories may or may not apply in the AUS context.
- learn strategies that will help peers understand the conventions of academic discourse.
- develop a philosophy and practical approach to peer-tutoring in writing.

Course Outcomes

After completing this course, WRI 221 students will be able to
- read students' papers with the aim of helping them clarify content through verbal observations on organization, development, expression, and mechanics.
- write useful comments that allow tutored students to understand their writing from a reader's point of view.
- hold conferences with students that help them identify aspects of their written assignments requiring greater clarity, organization, and/or development.
- speak and write about the issues and theories related to writing tutoring.
- evaluate how these issues and theories pertain to the AUS context.

Performance Assessment

The following is the percentage breakdown for your final grade.

Class participation	10
Dialogue journals (5)	25
Short paper (Who am I as a Writer in English?)	10
Grammar presentation	10
Writing tutor practicum and reflection	05
Research paper proposal	05
Research paper	25
Final Presentation	10

Class Participation

Student participation in class makes good, pedagogical sense. Student questions and insights on reading and lecture topics add depth and richness to the class-based learning, which is why classes often call for class participation. However, in WRI 221, the goal of class participation stretches beyond these generally acknowledged benefits. As this course addresses peer collaboration and student-to-student learning inherent in peer tutoring, it is important to model these methods in class so students develop a true appreciation for how they work. Yet there is a more pressing need for your contributions in WRI 221. After training in WRI 221, students become Writing Center tutors or Writing Fellows at AUS. As multilingual tutors supporting multilingual peers in writing at an English-medium university in an Arab country, you hold a unique position in the realm of peer tutoring in writing. As most of our course readings will treat a North American context, WRI 221 students will need to contribute their experiences and insights as multilingual students at AUS to fill the information gap, to help the class consider how the addressed concepts resonate with their reality, and to forge an understanding of how writing tutoring can best be practiced at AUS.

The Dialogue Journal

Five dialogue journals—one submitted every two weeks starting the third week of class—constitute 25% of the grade. Consider the journals a venue for commenting informally on some of the readings, class activities, and discussions of the previous two weeks. In a dialogue journal, the reader responds to the writer of the journal, so this activity constitutes correspondence between us.

You have a lot of flexibility with these journals as their content can address a range of subjects. **Keep in mind, however, that the main idea behind these journals is discussion of these topics via your own life experience and understanding**. Below are questions to prompt ideas for writing topics in your journals:
* What parts of this week's required readings, activities, discussion interested/amused/surprised/shocked/angered/you? Why?
* Were there any common themes between readings, activities, discussion that you would like to explore?
* Did your readings, activities, discussion lead to questions that were not explored in class?
* What appeared in the readings or in-class discussion that seemed relevant to your experience as a language learner (or a learner of any subject)?

While I do not expect your journals to be written with slavish regard to grammar and organization, I do expect journals to contain thoughtful reflection expressed in a mature and coherent manner. Remember, I, as your audience, have to understand your ideas and impressions in order to respond to them.

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Sometimes students have been tempted to treat these journals as summaries of content or reading. I am not interested in summaries; I am interested in your insights on covered material. Summarize only to provide context for your insights and reflections.

Submit the journals by e-mail as an attachment. Each journal should be a minimum of 500 words.

Short Paper

This assignment asks you to respond to the question "Who am I as a Writer in English?" Prior to this assignment, you will have read works by multilingual or multidialectal authors who have treated different aspects of writing or communicating in English. Ponder these readings and our related class discussions as you begin to answer this question for yourself. I do not want to place many parameters around this assignment. You may respond in any form you feel conveys your answer: essay, short story, poetry, narrative. As such, it is hard for me to place a page or word minimum on the assignment. While it is a short assignment (i.e., significantly shorter than your research paper), you need to respond to all parts of the question: Who am I/as a writer/in English?

Grammar Presentations

As the semester progresses, you will come to understand that support with grammar is less important than support with organization, idea development, cohesion, and coherence; however, weak grammar that hinders clarity is a common problem among second language writers of English. As such, it is important for WRI 221 students to be able to identify and explain some of the most common second language grammar problems, particularly problems with tenses and run-on sentences. Each WRI 221 student will be assigned a grammar point to introduce in a 30-minute presentation to their classmates. Grammar presentations should be presented so that the class can induce grammar rules from authentic and relevant prose in which the grammar point is featured (instead of the class being told the rule and asked to create correct sentences using it). The grammar presentations should be interactive, with the assigned student acting as facilitator more than lecturer; in addition, the presentations should be fun. The professor will present the first grammar point and will review her session to model the above-mentioned requirements.

Writing Tutor Practicum/Reflection

The Writing Tutor Practicum refers to the three Writing Center/Writing Fellow observations and the one session conducting a tutorial in the Writing Center during the second half of the semester. To observe a session in the Writing Center, students

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may simply visit the Writing Center at their convenience and request permission of both the tutor and student to observe the session. I will distribute names, class assignments, and contact information of Writing Fellows so you can contact them to schedule an observation during one of their conferencing weeks. In total, three observations are required. After you have observed three tutoring sessions, you should arrange with one of the tutors in the Writing Center to take his/her session while the tutor sits with you for guidance and support if needed. The student being tutored should agree to the arrangement as well.

After each observation and your conducted session, write a reflection of one page or so detailing your impressions of the experience. You may want to discuss it in terms of how the experience compared to expectations raised by our readings and class discussion. The reflections are due the last day of our class.

Please note that these experiences will also figure in our weekly class discussions, especially as we read about tutoring issues and practices. Your observations will provide real life experience that will help the class understand and assess the ideas discussed in the readings, even as the readings will help you understand the sessions you observe.

Research Paper/Proposal/Presentation
Using the course objectives and/or course-related material as your guide, pick an area that has caught your interest during the semester. Of course, these objectives and topics are quite broad in scope. You will need to find a specific focus for your project.

The goal of this project is to allow you to satisfy your intellectual curiosity about an issue in writing, the writing process, the role of culture in writing, crosscultural communication, second language writing, various issues and controversies in collaborative learning or peer tutoring, etc. This list is not exhaustive. This project should increase your area of expertise in an aspect of being a peer tutor in writing. As you will be presenting the results of your project to the class at the end of the semester, it will also be educational to your audience (the class and me).

One of the most important aspects of writing is to know your audience. Ask yourself the following questions: What population will be reading/learning from this? What does that population know about this subject? What are the audience's interests and learning needs? How can you create a topic, structure, and organization that accommodate the strengths and limitations of the audience?

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You may use several kinds of resources. You must consult and use credible sources from the library and academic databases. (Please consult your list of "Useful Sources for Topics Related to Peer Tutoring in Writing.") You may draw from some of the texts and materials we have used in class. To ground your research in the AUS context, you may also interview individuals (students, peer tutors, professors, and scholars in various disciplines) for "their expert opinions" or for anecdotal information.

In keeping with the collaborative nature of this course, you will be meeting with a group of classmates once to discuss your ideas for your projects during Week 7 or 8, six or seven weeks prior to the project due date. The purpose of this activity will be to discuss, exchange, and hone ideas for your topic. You will also do a peer review with a classmate a few weeks before the due date. <u>In addition, it is REQUIRED that you meet with a Writing Center consultant at least once for additional feedback (and the opportunity to be in the "tutee" role).</u> To help you stay on track, I have scheduled a lab day for your final project topic exploration and source search during Week 9; in addition, a preliminary proposal will be due Week 11 to ensure you have picked a reasonable topic and found enough sources to meet your needs.

The typed, completed project will be due at Week 15. It should be roughly 10 pages in length; adherence to the APA documentation style is required.

While I have given you a lot of creative latitude with the short paper and the journals, for this assignment I expect a formal paper that is academic in tone and highlights your research skills.

I am happy to meet with you on your paper at any juncture in the process.

An oral presentation on the topic of your paper is also required. Your presentation to the class will be supplemented by class copies of a roughly 200-word abstract and your reference list (all should appear on one page). Presentation requirements for the final exam will be discussed prior to the presentation date.

Reading List
This reading list changes slightly from time to time as new issues important to your training are identified. I may substitute different readings during the semester depending on where class discussion leads us. Many of these readings are available through the *The Writing Lab Newsletter* online archives, other online archives, and our library databases; other readings come as handouts or can be found on reserve in the library. As I assign a reading for the following class, I will let you know how to access it.

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Theme 1—Who is my writing self?
    Kyoko Mori, "Language"
    Barbara Mellix, "From Outside, In"
    Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B"

Theme 2—How does culture affect writing?
    Bill Bryson, "The First Thousand Years"
    Carla Power, "Not the Queen's English"
    Robert Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education"
    Bouchra Moujtahid, "Influence of Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds on the Writing of Arabic and Japanese Students of English"
    Wayne Robertson, *Writing Across Borders* (video)
    Carol Severino, "Writing Centers as Linguistic Contact Zones and Borderlands"
    Ann Geller et al., "White Privilege Inventory"

Theme 3—How do writers write?
    Patricia Limerick, "Dancing With Professors"
    Donald Murray, "A Writer's Habits"
    Anne Lamott, "Shitty First Drafts"
    Anne Lamott, "Perfectionism"

Theme 4—Why talk about writing?
    Kenneth Bruffee, "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'"
    Muriel Harris, "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors"

Theme 5—How do you talk about writing?
    John Trimbur, "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?"
    Edwin Chin-Shong, "How Self-Definition Affects Tutoring: A Teacher Becomes a Tutor"
    Jeff Brooks, "Minimalist Tutoring: Making Students Do All the Work"
    Maria Eleftheriou, "Negotiating the Spaces Between Facilitative and Directive Strategies in a Middle Eastern Writing Centre"
    Ben Rafoth et al., "Sex in the Center: Gender Differences in Tutorial Interactions"
    Michael Pemberton, "The Ethics of Content: Negotiating Religious Arguments and Papers in Unfamiliar Disciplines"
    Kurt Bouman, "Raising Questions about Plagiarism"
    David Mosher et al., "Creating a Common Ground with ESL Writers"

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Analysis

While the gap between the peer-tutoring literature and the AUS context might have proven frustrating for students, the acknowledgement of the gap and the invitation to fill it—starting with the syllabus—have enriched the class. Whereas the reluctance of students to participate in class discussion is an oft-heard complaint, most students in WRI 221 take on this requirement with enthusiasm. This gap provides the opportunity for them to be the designated experts; they are the multilingual, multicultural students in an English-medium university in an Arab country who have yet to be addressed in the literature. Only they hold the key to this knowledge. That their lived experience is of value to their learning is exciting to the students; even funny stories from their high school days can hold some insight into their and their fellow students' issues as writers and learners. Recently, a comical but also enlightening class discussion revealed that even the very best students in last semester's WRI 221 class felt they had to "un-learn" plagiarism in their freshman year at AUS. With one startling anecdote after another, several of the WRI 221 students revealed that they were not only "not discouraged" from plagiarizing in secondary school but actually encouraged to engage in inadvertent plagiarism by schoolteachers who provided them essay models to memorize and repeat in order to facilitate standardization in grading. "We memorized these models so well," recounted one student, laughing, "that our English IGCSE exams [subject exams in UK-curriculum secondary schools worldwide] were returned ungraded with allegations of mass cheating!"

With those accounts out in the open, it is easy for tutor trainees to remember their own experiences, to realize that others share them, and to relate to the mindset of students who appear for tutoring help with obviously plagiarized assignments. Having "un-learned" such practices themselves makes them particularly effective cultural informants (Mosher, Granroth, and Hicks 2). These tutors can offer true guidance—and empathy—to bewildered students who need to shed a writing approach that produced positive results in secondary school but may result in expulsion at AUS. A tutor's advice holds more weight as "someone who has been there." Enlightening discussions like these occur throughout the semester and not only

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shape class learning, but, returning to Kail's observation, teach me to be a better peer-tutor trainer.

A quieter—but equally effective—source of information for my learning as a peer tutor trainer comes from the students' written assignments, and specifically, their reflections in their first short paper ("Who am I as a Writer in English?"), their dialogue journals, and their observation reflections. To demonstrate the ways in which my students' insight becomes my own, I offer the following dialogue journal entry written by an Indian student, Nikhil, in response to the essay "Language" by Kyoko Mori. Reacting to the resentment Mori expressed at the need of Japanese speakers to ascertain each other's status to address each other with the appropriate level of respect, Nikhil writes:

> In Indian culture, you add an extra word of respect after the title for people who are elder to you. Having to add a mandatory sign [when addressing] each person gets very irritating for me, especially as I am one of the youngest in my family, and I will not receive any such sign of respect from my family members. This could be a reason I have always liked speaking in English where people (siblings in my case) are held at a more equal level [by using] names regardless of their age. I know it is not the same [as Mori's situation] but I can understand how it feels when the language you grow up speaking sometimes goes against what you believe in.

As I accumulate such examples from my students, I have developed some understanding of the sociolinguistic negotiations required by their languages, and this helps me engage them in the kinds of class discussions from which we can all learn. With a repertoire of stories that students have shared over the semesters, I can nudge a class discussion along a particular route with a simple, "Are there instances in which status markers in your language disadvantage you?" and can even prompt them further to consider particular societal issues that I have learned are applicable to them. As we share examples, the implications of topics and theories related to multilingual situations come to life for the students, and they can explore their own relationships to these notions in a public venue, or more quietly in their dialogue journals. Quite simply, the more they share, the more they and I learn, and the better I can prompt the next

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semester's class.

In much the same way, student observations of Writing Center and Writing Fellow tutorials drive class content. As the syllabus notes, the observations provide context for understanding the readings, while the readings inform the way they understand the tutorials; the observations also allow the students more opportunity to fill the gap between local and canonical knowledge. The time set aside every week to discuss their observations allows the students to reconcile their experience with the readings. One issue that comes up nearly every semester is whether languages other than English should be used in the tutorial when the tutee's English skills are weak. While everyone agrees that English should be used primarily, students are often split as to whether breaking into native tongue to explain an abstract idea or clarify some vocabulary constitutes good practice. This past semester, a student, Laila, decided that this controversy needed more attention than mere class discussion, and she decided to make that particular question—which arose from an observation—the point of her research project, as her observation reflection below indicates:

> This observation made me think about my research paper topic. Due to the tutee's low English proficiency, the tutor and the tutee had difficulty communicating several times in the session. As both the tutee and tutor were highly motivated, the tutor eventually figured out what the tutee was trying to say after the tutee explained several times. Nonetheless, the session would have been less time consuming if the tutor and tutee had shared a language other than English. I think it would be interesting to research whether a peer tutoring session is more successful if the tutor and tutee share a language other than English. More specifically, can this scenario harm or enhance the tutee's experience in learning a new language?

In her research paper, Laila, unable to find peer tutoring or writing center scholarship that addressed her question, explained that "research based on [ESL / EFL] classrooms [would] be used to make inferences regarding peer tutoring." She also clarified that her research addressed "those who are involved in the writing centre in a place such as AUS, where many students have never written

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papers in English prior to entering." Ultimately, as it is required that research projects be presented to the class in the final weeks, Laila provided her classmates with a convincing, research-based argument for using a common native tongue when a lapse in communication threatens the success of a tutorial session. As I reflect on the dynamic and cyclical nature of our learning in this class, I am reminded of the description of tutor learning that Kail offered in the same article in which he suggested peer tutors train their teachers to train them: "Not lineal but recursive, the complex syntax of peer tutoring turns back on itself in a series of infinite loops of influence; cause and effect, teaching and learning chasing each other around and around" (598). Kail's point, made more than twenty-five years ago, has transcended time and space in WRI 221.

Laila's choice of a research topic grounded in the AUS context is not unusual; several students every semester engage in investigations unique to our circumstances and populations. For instance, this past semester also elicited student research on how Indian culture has influenced the development of English, the effect of gender on the AUS writing center, and the impact of cultural bias on writing tutorials. This last topic represented a first, very brave attempt to start a conversation about the prevalent stereotypes concerning the different populations living in the UAE and how these notions manifest on our campus and, of course, affect our work in the writing center. This courageous step by the student, rooted in a painful experience she had as a tutor in the writing center when a student's essay ridiculed people from her country, has made me realize that I must take up this challenge in future semesters of WRI 221. Not surprisingly, the focus of what Geller et al. refer to as "anti-racism work" (87) in our WRI 221 class will be very different from that discussed in their chapter, which was, of course, written for a North American audience. Nonetheless, as I have learned from my semesters with WRI 221, creating a space to discuss stereotypes and to share lived experiences will generate ways of talking, thinking about, and ultimately confronting, our own issues. Subsequently, addressing cultural bias will be the newest student-generated component of WRI 221 from which future tutor trainees will benefit. As Muriel Harris points out, "when training is truly collaborative, novice tutors

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should continue to shape the training. . . . For those of us who have proceeded on this principle, our syllabi, even though tentative, just get better and better each time" ("Using" 307).

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