Writing Fellows as Peer Leaders

Introduction

The Writing Fellows Program is an initiative of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Writing Center. The program connects undergraduate Writing Fellows with students in writing-intensive courses. Writing Fellows meet with course instructors, creating goals for student outcomes, and undergo two teaching periods per semester, when students submit drafts for course assignments. At these times, Writing Fellows first provide each student with written feedback, then meet with students for one-on-one writing conferences.

First-semester Writing Fellows take a course to learn how to tutor writing, gaining valuable insights into writing philosophy and pedagogy. However, although the Writing Fellows program uses the language of "leadership" in its recruitment, new Fellows' training does not address best practices for leadership, or how they, as undergraduate students, might navigate their positions as peer leaders.

I have had the opportunity to work as a Writing Fellow since my sophomore year, making this my third year as a peer writing tutor. In the fall of that first year, I worked with students in a FIG. In the spring, some of my students were graduating seniors. I didn't know how to handle either dynamic. By now, I understand that I don't need to "handle" my relationships with students; we listen to one another, and we both learn. However, with more guidance in and discussion of my status as a leader, I would have made a smoother transition.

Current training materials for Writing Fellows – the introductory course and ongoing education events (OGEs) – thoroughly prepare Writing Fellows to respond to academic writing. However, they do not explicitly consider Writing Fellows' status as peer leaders. While the program emphasizes the compatibility of all writers, that peer review is beneficial across

disciplines, its pedagogical discussions create a barrier between the knowing instructor and ignorant student.

For Writing Fellows without previous peer leadership experience, such arrangements can lead to experiences of imposter syndrome, resulting in posturing instruction that is either hesitant or too heavy-handed. This creates interactions that are less-than-satisfying for both the Writing Fellow and student. Most importantly, when a Writing Fellow worries about their social and professional presentation, it takes their focus away from instruction, worsening students' learning outcomes.

As peer tutors, Writing Fellows can serve as both friends and teachers, confidantes and role models. Ideally, Writing Fellows can leverage this dual status to achieve instructional outcomes inaccessible to professors, TAs, or casual "study buddies." Balancing friendliness and professionalism, they can use their positions as authority and peer to accomplish their instructional goals. However, undergraduate peer tutors are just that: peer undergraduates. On and off the job, Writing Fellows endure the same growing pains as their students. Despite having assumed a "leadership position," new Writing Fellows might not feel ready to lead, or at least unsure of how to navigate their dual roles. Without support, the stress of insecurity might compromise such Fellows' instruction.

The following change initiative, an incorporation of leadership-focused materials into existing educational structures, will help Writing Fellows step into themselves as peer tutors. By showing Fellows different approaches to leadership, Fellows will begin to understand their own preferences. This program should create dynamics wherein Fellows are not teaching an oppositional student, but learning in solidarity with that individual. By helping Fellows develop as leaders – to recognize themselves as leaders – this program will allow them to be more

confident and comfortable in their work, immediately improving their own experiences, and ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for students.

Inclusive Engagement

This process, the adoption of discourse around leadership, will emphasize the Leadership Framework value of inclusive engagement. I believe that by practicing inclusive engagement, a leader centers their team in the action process. Leadership thus centers the team's contributions, learning, and consensus. As such, the change is by and about the team, merely facilitated by a leader. As process leaders strive to include and value all parties' perspectives, inclusive engagement will limit the effects of organizational hierarchy.

Prioritizing inclusive engagement will remind us of the purpose of the Writing Fellows Program, itself: to increase students' capacity for self-expression, helping them more effectively bring their voices into the world. Further symbolizing inclusive engagement, this program will allow Writing Fellows and students to open their voices, to better teach one another to communicate across spoken and written media. Lastly, revolution through education, as described by Paulo Freire, is a dynamic that Writing Fellows already study in the introductory curriculum. Although the implementation of Freire's educational vision may currently be out of the reach of new, grasping tutors – through this change initiative, practicing inclusive engagement will keep solidarity at the forefront of tutors' minds.

The intersection of my own leadership history and inclusive engagement – will allow me to better serve the discussions that would be at the foundation of this change initiative. First, I have experienced the importance of recognizing and maintaining relationships with all students. At the 2017 Pushkin Summer Institute, one of our students spent the summer with severe allergies, which restricted his breathing and caused nausea until he was able to access proper

medication. This student was quiet, and I made a point to keep checking in with him, and he thanked me for it at the end of the program. Knowing this, as my team develops the program structure, I will emphasize the strength of relationship in instruction, seeking to create opportunities for personal connection.

Second, I have had some experiences that involved helping others peel back cultural barriers and assumptions. Because this program will challenge popular conceptions of power and leadership – while repositioning Writing Fellows to exercise positive influence – it will be critical for Fellows to identify their own biases, both in terms of traditional conceptions of leadership and systemic oppression. When I have talked to my BVEB team about the political bent of our educational programming, and when my co-facilitator and I spoke to our CRC Writing Studio students about how prioritizing grammar can reproduce historic inequity within academic spaces – our discussion connected concrete, everyday actions to the more difficult concepts in question. I learned that including both aspects – the long-term theoretical and everyday concrete – makes these discussions more accessible and effective. As my team and I create opportunities for Writing Fellows to learn about leadership, we will utilize both modes.

Decision-Making

To create the most effective possible program, my team and I would practice the decision-making competency. I believe that decision-making, as it is defined in the Leadership Framework, is an inclusive, transparent process. For effective decision-making, leaders actively engage all concerned parties, bringing their perspectives together into an informed consensus. Within our context, such decision-making will enhance efficacy – both by creating the most relevant curriculum, and by securing its popular support. From the beginning, my team will

work broadly and directly with Writing Fellows, our target audience, to determine what they want from the program.

As a Pushkin Summer Institute counselor, I learned that co-created decisions are more effective. Our program coordinator made our weekly schedules, assigning our after-school activities and excursions. This meant that, as counselors, we were often tasked with facilitating or supervising activities that neither we nor the students were interested in. Although these were great opportunities for all of us, activities that had been successful in past years, they were not always what the current group would have chosen. Allowing each year's students some choice – voting on what activities would be held, or when pre-determined events would be scheduled – could have increased their engagement.

Supporting the Learning and Development of Others

Once we have developed curriculum goals, my team and I will implement them in a program structure. To do so, we will use the competency of supporting the learning and development of others. This Leadership Framework competency emphasizes peer learning, practicing skills, and sharing expertise with others. Rather than prizing their own status as a teacher, a leader that supports the learning and development of others works to share their strengths for the benefit of all.

In my roles, I have found that one-on-one meetings have held me accountable and facilitated my professional growth. As the Badger Volunteers Educational Programming Intern, having more frequent meetings with a supervisor ensured that I stuck to my goals more closely, than during periods when I had fewer direct conversations with a supervisor. Furthermore, as a Writing Fellow, some of my most important pedagogical growth has occurred during one-on-one meetings with a Commenting Mentor. In these meetings, which Writing Fellows get to have once

or twice per semester, they discuss their written comments with a more experienced Writing Center staff member. Personally, having one-on-one feedback on my comments and teaching methods has been both more encouraging and more impactful, than if I had only explored those subjects in group discussions.

Additionally, within my Badger Volunteers internship this semester, I have had the opportunity to help my BVEB team members grow further by sharing a new task with them. Specifically, because my course schedule conflicts with the successful Friday afternoon time slot for education sessions, my BVEB team members have generously agreed to facilitate events during those times. Not only has this allowed my team members to fulfill their own goals of leading education sessions, but preparing the associated materials for them has been a helpful exercise for me, as well.

These lessons – of the importance of direct feedback and learning through responsibility – will influence the program structure as follows. First, my team and I will work to maximize new Writing Fellows' opportunities to discuss their own leadership. Ideally, these conversations will occur as a function of meeting with one's Commenting Mentor. Second, my team would work to establish small groups of Writing Fellows, discussion circles for leadership support, with experienced Fellows as facilitators.

Self-Awareness

Acting with self-awareness will support the success and longevity of this initiative. As presented in the Leadership Framework, a leader with self-awareness demonstrates an understanding of their own motivations and influence, attending to their team members' and community's participation and fulfillment. The team responsible for maintaining discussions of

leadership in the Writing Fellows Program will practice self-awareness by monitoring

participation and regularly reflecting on the program's progress.

When I worked for the Pushkin Summer Institute, each year, some counselors were less

active in sharing the duties of our position. As such, resentment festered among those of us who

assumed their responsibilities. Because we did not assert ourselves, our team cohesion suffered.

In this change initiative, we would keep concrete records of Fellows' participation, removing

uncertainty about the division of responsibility. We would further promote equal participation by

checking in with Fellows if we notice that they are contributing less than they had agreed to do.

Over time, we could adjust the program roles, according to what Fellows really wanted,

prolonging successful participation.

As the Badger Volunteers Educational Programming Intern, my BVEB team and I have

regular opportunities for feedback and reflection, maintaining focus on the truth of our work,

rather than our artificial achievements. We distribute feedback slips to students attending our

events, which allows us to the truth of our work – our events' real impact on Badger Volunteers.

When Badger Volunteers' opinions diverge from mine, and from one another, I remember the

importance of learning from the community that you are supposed to be serving. To measure our

program's real success, beyond the student feedback that Fellows receive every semester, we

will solicit feedback from participating Writing Fellows. We will collect their anonymous

thoughts: how prepared they felt as they began their work, what they discovered about

leadership, and how they felt that the program supported them.

Conclusion

As a graduating senior, my participation in this effort, making leadership a more central

aspect of the Writing Fellows Program, would occur during the beginning phases. I would solicit

support for the change initiative, assist with preliminary discussions, and identify Writing Center staff members and continuing Writing Fellows who would advance the program into the coming years.

For my own part, I believe the first challenge would be obtaining support for my change initiative. The Writing Fellows Program has had an enduring set of practices and traditions, with what has felt like a solid hierarchical structure. To solicit the support of the Writing Fellows Program staff, I would share the stories of students who began working as Writing Fellows before they had accumulated significant leadership experience. By giving my own and others' honest testimonials, I would show the potential impact of change, generating a purpose that others could join.

In the future, a second challenge would be the question of allocating time to the effort. Namely, Writing Fellows already spend an entire semester discussing writing center pedagogy, wherein every precious week covers an important topic. Furthermore, undergraduate students are already often overcommitted; they would resist having to attend additional training events. As such, we would tuck discussions of leadership into existing structures. In the introductory course, certain conversations could be expanded to include leadership. Fellows would be encouraged to talk about their experiences as peer leaders with their Commenting Mentors. Lastly, Writing Fellows Program staff could host OGEs, which allow Fellows to fulfill an existing requirement, that focus more on the practice of leadership than on best practices for teaching writing.

Both the founding and continuing teams will need the support of participating Writing Fellows and the program staff. We will access our peers' support by listening to and serving their needs, as described above. Being candid about our own motivations to implement discussion of

leadership, how insecurity in leadership can compromise students' learning outcomes, will help us gain the support of Writing Fellow Program staff.

Last fall, I served as a Writing Fellow for my fifth and final semester. Between my experience in the position and my outside growth as a leader, I had new confidence in my role and abilities. This ease meant that my responsibilities felt more manageable than ever before, and I felt that my instruction was better, too. I would like to implement this change initiative, so that even new Writing Fellows can feel solid in their leadership, allowing them to work with students more comfortably, and thus more effectively. As peer tutors, Writing Fellows can share their academic insights best when they have the skills and awareness lead effectively, even through unexpected or stressful situations. By empowering Writing Fellows, helping them find confidence and stability in their own leadership, this program will ultimately create better learning outcomes for their students.