

# The Role of the Student Experience in Shaping Academic Writing Development in Higher Education: The Peer Writing Tutors' Perspective

## Introduction

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On 29 June 2011, 280 delegates interested in the teaching, tutoring, research, administration and development of academic writing in higher education in Europe descended upon the University of Limerick to discuss *the role of the student experience in shaping academic writing development in higher education*. The EATAW 2011 conference invited all those interested in academic writing development in higher education to contribute to the discussion on enhancing the quality of the student experience through writing. Enhancing the student experience is central to the vision and mission of most higher education institutions in Europe and beyond. How students experience academic writing impacts upon their identities and on their participation in academic and disciplinary environments. Writing programmes and initiatives that actively engage students in the writing conventions and practices of their academic communities can enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

Once the theme for the conference was chosen, the most natural next step was to ensure that, when discussing the student experience, the voice of the students would be represented and listened to. What better way to open the conference than with the voices of student peer writing tutors? With the experience of being both students and tutors, who better to tell delegates about the student experience and the impact of writing and tutoring in writing on that experience? Their voices would set the tone for the event and shape the days of the conference that would follow. Throughout the conference, their thoughts and reflections would act as constant reminders of why we had come together as a group to discuss writing. In voicing their experience, they would remind us that there is much to be learned about teaching from the voiced experience of those we profess to teach. The idea of a keynote panel of peer writing tutors emerged during a stimulating meeting between Leigh Ryan, Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams and ourselves, during the European Writing Centers' Association (EWCA) 2010 conference.

The keynote panel of peer writing tutors brought together a selection of tutors from across Europe to discuss how working as a peer writing tutor has shaped, or is being shaped by, their student experience. Prior to the conference, a call for proposals was sent to writing centres and programmes across Europe which support peer tutoring in writing. In order for one of their tutors to be considered to represent their centre or programme on the keynote panel, centres/programmes submitted a group narrative, reflecting on peer tutoring in writing and the student experience in their context. Peer writing tutors from each centre/programme were invited to write a collaborative narrative of 1,500 words that highlighted the shared experience of student peer writing tutors. Only one narrative was accepted from each European centre or programme.

The response to the call for proposals was overwhelming. More than ten writing centres/programmes from across Europe submitted narratives. Each narrative had an important story to share that shed light on the student experience. Unfortunately, only three narratives could be chosen to be presented as part of the keynote panel of peer writing tutors. An international review committee, set up specifically for this purpose, selected the three narratives that would become the point of departure for the presentation by

the keynote panel. Selected centres/programmes then nominated the peer writing tutor who would represent them on the keynote panel to discuss peer tutoring in writing and the student experience in their context. The selected peer writing tutors received a scholarship to attend the conference, including travel and accommodation fees. The keynote panel of peer writing tutors certainly fulfilled its objective: it gave a voice to the students, it set a tone for the conference and it gave shape to the conversations that followed throughout the conference and beyond.

That only three narratives could be chosen for the keynote panel of peer writing tutors did not preclude the merit of the remaining narratives. These narratives also had important tutor-student experiences to share. Therefore, it was decided that the collection of narratives and the important stories of these peer writing tutors and students should be captured in this special issue of the *Journal of Academic Writing*. Seven narratives are published in this collection. We hope that you enjoy the collection of narratives as much as we did and that you learn some valuable lessons about the student experience of writing, as expressed by these peer writing tutors. This collection also serves to remind us of the important work that peer writing tutors do in writing centres and on writing programmes, and it demonstrates the closeness of these peer writing tutors to the experience of the very students to whom we reach out each day in our work.

The first paper that appears herein is the collective narrative presented by the keynote panel of peer writing tutors at the conference: Constanze Alpen, University of Cologne; Lisa Breford, University of Limerick; and Simone Tschirpke, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder). This reflection is followed by the seven narratives written by writing centres and writing programmes across Europe.

### **Acknowledgements**

We are indebted to the international review committee that chose the three narratives that would form the keynote panel of peer writing tutors, namely, James Donohue, Gerd Bräuer and Leigh Ryan. We are also very grateful for the feedback the committee provided for all of the narratives that were submitted.