

# Peer mentoring experiences of psychology students at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre

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## Abstract

*'It really helps knowing that you are going to have someone around to help you...'*

*This short article reports on research taking place into peer writing tutorials at London Metropolitan University and examines in particular, the experiences of psychology students who have taken part in the scheme. Some of the implications of this research for psychology students at the university will be highlighted. The first author is a psychology PhD student, and works as a Research and Teaching Assistant and a Student Writing Mentor at the London Metropolitan University Writing Centre.*

**B**ASED IN the School of Psychology, London Metropolitan University Writing Centre (see [www.londonmet.ac.uk/writingcentre](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/writingcentre)) implements a Student Writing Mentor Scheme which involves undergraduate and postgraduate students providing writing support for other students. Writing support comes in the form of one-hour, one-to-one tutorial sessions in which students can discuss their writing-related issues with a mentor. The scheme is collaborative, non-directive and non-hierarchical in approach, and writing support at the centre is open to all London Metropolitan University students across different disciplines and levels of study (see Harrington et al., 2007, for a rationale behind the scheme).

In the 2006–2007 academic year, the Writing Centre was staffed by a team of 11 Student Writing Mentors (10 undergraduate and 1 postgraduate), from a range of different disciplines, including psychology. In the following year, the Centre had nine undergraduate and two postgraduate mentors, out of which six were returning and five were new mentors. At present, we have a team of 16 mentors (14 undergraduate, two postgraduate), including four psychology students.

More than 1,300 tutorials were conducted with students from various disciplines during the first two years of operation (from October 2006 to May 2008). Around 20 per cent of students who used the mentor Scheme were studying psychology, followed by business studies (11 per cent) and management (11 per cent).

Regular ongoing reflective practice is encouraged in the students and mentors after each session and this is one way in which the scheme is monitored and evaluated. Both mentors and students are required to complete a feedback sheet after each tutorial, where we ask them to reflect on how they felt the session went and identify the areas they covered during the tutorial. This article will briefly describe some of the experiences of the psychology students and how peer mentoring is supporting them academically, as identified in their feedback. A more comprehensive account of mentors' and students' experiences of peer tutoring at the centre can be found in Harrington et al. (2007) and Bakhshi, Harrington and O'Neill (in press) respectively.

Many of the psychology students who visited the Writing Centre wrote about why they

booked a tutorial session in the first place. One reason included wanting encouragement that they were on the right track with their assignments: 'I needed someone to tell me if I am going in the right direction with my report. . . I am now more confident about my report than when I came in.' The majority of psychology students noted how their confidence levels with their academic assignments improved after a tutorial with a mentor, as illustrated by this quotation:

*'Before attending the tutorial I didn't believe that I could write a coherent conclusion; by the end of the tutorial, I have a new-found confidence in my ability. I also found that I understood more about the module than I did initially.'*

Other students commented that talking about their assignment with a mentor helped them gain a fuller understanding of what they were required to do for their assignment: 'It helped to find focus and to talk about my "worries"/considerations.' They felt that they were allowed to work at their own pace during tutorials and perceived the conversation with a mentor as a useful way of organising their thoughts and taking their assignments forward:

*'Discussing my ideas, questions and concerns and receiving feedback . . . helped to ease my mind and to feel less scattered and more able to begin a draft.'*

Students also felt that the mentors gave them constructive criticism on how to improve their assignments, which they perceived as helpful: '[The mentor] . . . came with a fresh eye and was able to pick out possible problematic areas, and gave good criticism on how to . . . make it better'. Students also believed that the mentors encouraged them to develop their writing by being more critical of it: 'Jessica helped me to find a different way to express myself in writing. The session also made me look at my writing style and be more critical and more detailed when writing'. In summary, mentors and students discuss a range of issues during tutorials (i.e. academic writing style, coursework requirements and writing conclusions), that have also been identified in other mentoring

schemes (Breen et al., 2001; Hill & Reddy, 2007).

The above quotations suggest that students feel they are benefiting from the tutorials because they help them to develop their writing. This is supported by the findings of an online survey conducted to investigate psychology students' experiences of using the Writing Centre (see Bakhshi et al., forthcoming). The results showed that 90 per cent of psychology students felt that their concerns were very or fairly well met in their tutorials and that 95 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with their tutorials. Together, these results indicate that psychology students are happy with the support they are receiving from the centre. Although this article provides only a snapshot of psychology students' experiences of peer mentoring at the Writing Centre, findings from our research more generally suggest that undergraduate students perceive Mentors as a good source of advice for their academic assignments. Detailed descriptions of the areas discussed in tutorials from a Mentor's perspective (see Harrington et al., 2007) also show that students are generally happy with this form of writing support.

These findings have some interesting implications for psychology teaching and learning practice. Having discipline-specific mentors may be beneficial for students, as mentors and students can share common knowledge about the subject and its conventions. Further, students may find it useful to discuss their writing concerns with a fellow student who may also have encountered similar writing-related issues. Fellow psychology students seem to be an excellent audience for students who are coming to terms with the various complexities related to the kinds of scientific writing, which students are expected to produce throughout their undergraduate course. The adoption of an informal, non-directive and collaborative approach encourages open discussion of writing-related issues, and offers psychology students access to supplementary writing support and a learning experience that is dif-

ferent from what they encounter in other teaching situations on their course. We would stress however, that this type of support should not, of course, be a substitute for core teaching practices within universities (i.e. lectures, seminars, etc). Instead, peer Mentors can provide additional support for students as they can be used alongside traditional forms of teaching. More importantly, peer mentoring schemes need not be implemented in university Writing Centres or Learning Development Units, but instead can be established and developed within local contexts such as faculties or individual departments.

## References

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