



Seeking International Tutor Training Certification During COVID and Social Upheaval

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Abstract

This paper describes the evolution of the peer tutor training and mentoring program at Ontario Tech University, from simple beginnings to a multifaceted program with many opportunities for professional learning and growth for peer tutors. As a part of developing the tutor training program to meet international certification requirements, opportunities, such as mentoring by an academic subject specialist and learning modules of greater depth, were developed for the tutors. A reflection on the certification process shows that certification has been beneficial to both mentees and mentors in the program because it has contributed to creating a structure for training, mentoring, and assessment. The process has also shown that training and pedagogical practices must go beyond the certification requirements: even though the certifying body prescribes peer tutor training in ethics and equity, it does not propose that training be responsive to current societal issues and be intentional about culturally sustaining pedagogy.

The authors of this paper argue that training should address social concerns if learning centres and writing centres are to be safer spaces for all students.

Key words: mentoring, tutoring, tutor training, writing tutor, anti-racist pedagogy, peer tutors

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Tutor training is integral to writing centre praxis. This is because writing centres and learning centres, while generally managed by professional writing centre practitioners or academics with professional development opportunities, frequently rely on the labour of undergraduate peer tutors who are new to writing centre theory and practice. In this paper, we share our experiences as writing and learning centre professionals based in Canada who embarked on an application for U.S.-based, postsecondary peer tutor training certification program. Having our peer tutor training program certified could potentially ensure the allocation of time and resources to our training, and mentoring could lead to an improved program quality. A secondary aim of this paper is to show how the reflective aspects of the peer tutor training program development processes converge with social movements that occurred concurrently and triggered a new approach to tutor training. Appendix A shows the training modules that were added to the peer tutor training over time.

Our approach to writing and learning centre work is best described by “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris, 2012, p. 95) and is the theoretical foundation of our work in the learning centre. Paris (2012) defines “culturally sustaining pedagogy” as one that

requires that they [educators] support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and

foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. (p. 95)

Out of our reflective-writing process emerged an awareness of the urgent need to address issues in peer tutor training with a goal of our peer tutoring training program to create a supportive learning environment for undergraduates from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Our experience and insights will be useful to other postsecondary professionals interested in obtaining certification for tutor training programs, as well as for those wishing to adopt a culturally sustaining pedagogy and a social justice approach to writing and learning centre work with the intention to make these spaces safer across intersectional identities (Herrmann, 2017; Martini & Webster, 2017). This paper outlines the process of seeking peer tutor training certification by a university learning centre (LC). It also describes the LC, its existing tutoring program, its embedded training and mentoring initiatives, as well as the motivation for seeking certification for the tutor training and the steps involved. Finally, this discussion highlights goals for the tutor training program beyond certification.

Background

The International Tutor Training Program Certification (ITTPC) is offered by the College Reading & Learning Association (CRLA), a professional organization based in Wisconsin, U.S. It aims to encourage discussion, professional development, and resource creation for educators working broadly to support the reading and learning of postsecondary students. The CRLA was initially founded to support postsecondary reading instructors in the Western U.S., but its focus has since broadened into postsecondary reading and learning in general. CRLA began inviting Canadian members in the 1970s and global members in the 1980s. The ITTPC program certifies postsecondary institutions in recognizing tutors as having met training requirements at three distinct levels. Certification ensures a baseline of standardization of tutor training following CRLA guidelines (College Reading & Learning Association, 2018).

A reviewer is assigned for this certification process whose role is to review the centre's professional development materials and resources. In addition to specifying hours of training on several topics under the categories of *Basics*, *Communication*, *Learning or Study Techniques*, *Ethics and Equity*, and *Electives*, ITTPC also requires programs to have sound hiring practices that include an application process, panel interviews, and demo sessions. Also required are regular tutor evaluations. Tutors receive certification once they complete the required training modules at their level and have tutored students directly for a minimum of 25 hours (College Reading & Learning Association, 2018). Thus, LC program coordinators need to develop and train tutors, monitor and record completion and program usage, and share this data with university management and team members.

The LC that is the subject of this paper is housed at Ontario Tech University (OTU), in Ontario, Canada that employs ten full-time employees (three of whom are Writing Specialists) and approximately 60 peer staff every academic year, consisting of 40 peer tutors, 12 Peer Assisted Study Sessions leaders, and five program assistants. The LC provides academic-support programming to a student body of over 10,000 postsecondary students, with a focus on first- and second-year undergraduate students. The LC has offered tutoring in content courses, English-language support, and support for writing, math, chemistry, engineering, and physics to undergraduates since 2010. The undergraduate peer tutors are students in their second, third, or fourth year of undergraduate studies who are permitted to work up to ten hours per week in individual sessions or in learning communities, such as the Writing Room, Math, Chemistry, Physics, and Varsity Study Halls.

Content peer tutors support undergraduate students with course-specific content while writing peer tutors are trained to assist undergraduate students with searching library databases for articles, brainstorming, mind-mapping, clarifying assignment instructions, drafting thesis statements, planning essays, outlining, revising, and referencing. The writing centre's full-time, professional writing specialists mentor the writing peer tutors as well as develop

and teach writing-focused training modules for the tutor training program not part of ITTPC but essential to writing centre work. The topics of the modules include training on working with multilingual writers, writing centre approaches, a history of writing centres, and using assistive technology in writing (see Appendix A for all training modules).

Challenge: Applying for Certification While Surviving a Pandemic and Living in a Time of Social Upheaval

In 2015, the LC started developing its peer tutor training with the intention of following CRLA's ITTPC standards. In preparation, the LC's team developed training modules about learning centre policies, as well as guidelines for peer tutoring, structuring a tutoring session, academic integrity, communication, active listening, making referrals, problem-solving, and working with multilingual students, to complement pre-existing module on study strategies and learning preferences. In 2018, the team decided not only to follow CRLA standards, but also to pursue ITTPC certification because of the benefits to students, peer tutors, and the university. These include the opportunity for students to be coached by the LC's peer tutors with specialized training and professional development in tutoring and communication skills, learning strategies, and principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion. For peer tutors, advantages include developing career skills and building their resumé's. Benefits for the university include supporting students' academic learning along with creating a culture of learning and respect for best practices (College Reading & Learning Association, 2018).

In pursuit of our goal of certification, the peer tutoring program coordinator developed additional modules in 2019 (see Appendix A) to prepare senior peer tutors to work in learning centres. Senior peer tutors would act as mentors to new peer tutors while continuing in their role as peer tutors. The topics introduced to senior peer tutors were peer learning supports in higher education; self-evaluation and goal setting; critical thinking, meta-cognition, and self-regulated learning; adult-learning principles; structuring the learning environment; and

mentoring strategies. Unlike the existing ITTPC Level 1 training modules, which were mandatory for all tutors during their first year of work, the new ITTPC modules in the Level 2 training were optional; peer tutors could choose to take the Level 2 modules and become designated as senior peer tutors and mentors to new and returning Level 1 tutors. The first cohort completed Level 2 training in the Fall 2019 term, and then began mentoring Level 1 tutors.

The CRLA certification application was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and LC staff focusing on the pivot to online support. Tutoring appointments were reduced and were moved exclusively online due to the pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic, the In-Service Tutor Development (ITD) program was developed to keep tutors connected to the program online (see Appendix A). The curriculum was designed to give academic specialists opportunities to share their subject-matter expertise, to provide structure to the peer tutors' work, and to offer ongoing professional development to both specialists and peer tutors. Peer tutors participated in mentoring sessions with academic subject specialists to reflect on their role as peer tutors, their prior educational experiences, expectations in peer tutoring sessions, and to reflect on how tutoring experiences could transfer into future careers. Academic subject specialists designed asynchronous modules about tutoring practices, as well as topics in chemistry, math, physics, and writing. The asynchronous modules for writing tutors focused on the theoretical underpinnings of writing centre work and modules were designed to include components related to culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Currently, the program for writing tutors is a two-year sequential program for two cohorts with a curriculum about tutoring writing. This curriculum focuses on cornerstone texts in the fields of writing centre studies and English as an additional language. The texts are read, discussed in a group with a writing specialist and other peer writing tutors, and written about in reflective pieces. The first-year cohort completes weekly readings from the *Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016), the *American Psychological Association Publication Manual* (2020), and pages from the writing section of the LC's writing webpage. The goal

of these readings is to provide tutors with a conceptual base for writing consultations while encouraging them to incorporate writing centre ethos and pedagogy in their work by centring students, respecting diversity and confidentiality, and taking a nonjudgmental approach to writing instruction.

The second-year cohort of peer writing tutors reads about writing from a social justice approach through a history of writing centres in Canada (Bell, 2020), writing centre approaches (Rafoth, 2007, 2010; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016; Wingate, 2005), a world Englishes approach to writing (Sabatino & Rafoth, 2012), and a multilingual approach to writing centres and writers (Thonus, 2003, 2014). The second-year peer writing tutors also have weekly discussion goals on topics including decolonizing writing consultations through multilingualism. The decolonizing goal is for writing tutors to realize that academic writing conventions are based on the many colonial legacies present in the education system and to value the potential for creativity and innovation that multilingual speakers bring to university writing. Second-year peer tutors also write a weekly response to the readings, which they share and discuss with their writing specialist mentor and other peer writing tutors in the second-year group.

At the mentoring meetings, tutors and mentors discuss specific case scenarios and are coached on communication, addressing genre requirements, and setting boundaries with their tutees. From a writing and learning perspective, the certification of writing peer tutors means that the writing specialist is guaranteed institutional time to lead both initial as well as on-going training and mentoring of the peer writing tutors. The readings, group discussions, and reflective responses to the readings guarantee that the tutors learn about cornerstone texts in the field. These certification requirements can serve to protect the hours dedicated to the program by the writing specialists and the peer writing tutors, which might otherwise be reduced or eliminated based on institutional needs.

For the purposes of obtaining CRLA certification, the LC assessed their two existing training levels previously developed against CRLA standards for three levels of certification to

see what content would need to be developed by the peer learning coordinator. To do this analysis, the coordinator combined the existing mentoring and training modules, observation and feedback schedules, and evaluation and self-evaluation practices, and then proceeded to develop new training modules based on the framework provided by CRLA, as noted in Table 1. One of the CRLA curriculum categories, *Ethics and Equity*, had not been in the previous iterations of the curriculum (see training modules created before 2020 and the modules created in 2021 in Appendix A).

Table 1. CRLA categories of training and new modules developed.

Categories	Modules
Basics	Handling Difficult Tutoring Situations Assertiveness
Communication	Conflict Resolution
Learning or Study Techniques	Active Learning Strategies for Higher Education Retrieval Practice Stress Management
Ethics and Equity	Cognitive Bias Gender Identity and Inclusion Universal Design for Learning Social Justice Approach to Disability in Higher Education
Electives	Setting Boundaries

Developing *Ethics and Equity* content for our curriculum called for some reflection on our existing mentoring and training practices. The timing of our reflective process converged with the tragic murder of George Floyd (Hill et al., 2022), massive demonstrations by the Black Lives Matter movement (Hutchinson, 2015; Noel, 2018), and finally, our participation in a professional development opportunity within the LC: a book club on Anti-Racist Writing Workshop (Chavez, 2021). As a result, we felt we needed to be more intentional in incorporating an anti-racist approach to the training curriculum of peer tutors. Due to the restructuring of some learning centre positions, however, staffing changes occurred not long after this paper was presented. As a result, the project of developing an antiracist approach for the peer tutor training has been put on hold.

Tutor Feedback on the Program Changes and Lessons Learned

In their 2021-2022 year-end evaluation, the peer tutors proffered positive feedback about the revised training they received. They reported that they felt the weekly modules helped them improve their accountability towards the job due to the need to be connected every week and complete modules on communication, facilitation, and professional skills, along with knowledge of active learning strategies.

An unexpected outcome of this program development process, however, has been that we identified a gap in tutor training that must be addressed if the tutoring program is to adopt a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012, p. 95) framework and social justice lens. Social justice needs to be in the training curriculum so that writing and learning centre professionals and peer tutors have the information to develop sensitivity to social justice issues and uphold the values of equity, inclusion, and fairness in providing support to students. Only through education and discussion will the peer tutors feel comfortable taking these issues and approaches on in tutoring. To this end, tutors need to be versed in the history, current events, and the centre's culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012, p. 95) approach to best support

learners. New professional development for tutors should be developed, even though, for certification purposes, the training is considered robust as it is. Going forward, LC staff hope to be able to reflect on incorporating decolonizing and antiracist teachings (Chavez, 2021) into the learning outcomes and curriculum; in particular, to create new modules on the topic of ethics and equity, in partnership with the university Indigenous Education and Cultural Services staff and the Student Engagement and Equity staff. We would like to develop a curriculum that fosters awareness of positionality, power, privilege, and responsibility and provides tutors with the knowledge needed to advocate for culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012, p. 95) and become allies of students of underrepresented populations, contributing to making the learning centre a safer space, that is, a place that actively strives to become safe across intersectionalities (Herrmann, 2017; Martini, 2017).

The process of applying for certification provided the impetus to integrate and systematize aspects of the peer tutoring program that had been less structured, such as mentoring and program evaluation. CRLA certification was eventually awarded to the LC in the Fall 2022 term. This certification indicates that the LC, including the peer tutors, is recognized for following the set standards in the development and delivery of peer tutoring. Moving forward, the LC intends to continue to meet the requirements for CRLA certification and to refine its training practices. This aim will be accomplished by keeping up to date with CRLA publications and standards, as well as conducting regular assessments to identify not only the most effective ways to teach training modules and engage peer tutors, but also to identify modules requiring revision. Tutoring standards were recently developed by the Learning Specialists Association of Canada (LSAC) for the postsecondary level in Canada (Learning Specialists Association of Canada, n.d.). It may be in the LC's interest to obtain a Canadian certification through LSAC in addition to CRLA, depending on whether local and U.S. certification is desirable, or whether one certification would be sufficient.

Overall, the reflection, examination, and discussions that have occurred through the application for certification continue. These have taught us that our efforts to provide quality peer tutoring and peer tutor training must go beyond simply meeting certification requirements. Such requirements can be quite disconnected from the world outside the centre, with fixed hours to be spent on training and broad categories for module development, while social issues that affect students are continually evolving. We believe that LC professionals and academics must be responsive to societal issues, and that this may be accomplished by implementing professional development practices through training modules that raise awareness and encourage agency among peer tutors and students supported. In this context, responsiveness means developing decolonizing and antiracist pedagogies, as well as continuing to be responsive to social upheaval and potential impact on writing and academic support. This approach can be implemented by developing modules on decolonizing and antiracist pedagogy for peer tutors, in conjunction with units on culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Upon reflection holistically, a balanced tutoring program works best; one that is neither overly prescriptive in curriculum, nor lacking in form, substance, or regularity. Some peer tutors benefit enormously from mentoring by a content specialist in their area. They sometimes mention mentoring influences their career choices. In a larger peer tutoring program, a certain amount of structure from curriculum and policies ensures that all tutors receive a base level of instruction and mentoring. In this way, certification of a postsecondary tutoring program can help ensure more consistency and better quality to habitual practice. At the institutional level, international certification may protect the program from potential funding changes in future. Certification can also facilitate tutor recruitment, as tutors can then list an internationally recognized tutor certification on their resumé.

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Appendix A – Modules Added to the Peer Tutor Training Over Time

Training module that existed prior to 2015

- Study strategies and learning preferences.

Training modules created in 2015 (Level 1 Training)

- Learning Centre policies.
- Guidelines for peer tutoring.
- Structuring a tutoring session.
- Academic integrity.
- Communication and active listening.
- Making referrals.
- Problem solving (for STEM tutors).
- Working with multilingual students (for writing tutors).
- Weekly readings from the Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016) (for writing tutors, complemented with mentoring).
- APA style manual sections (for writing tutors, complemented with mentoring).
- Writing centre online resources (for writing tutors, complemented with mentoring).
- Using assistive technology in writing (for writing tutors, complemented with mentoring).

Training modules created in 2019 (Level 2 Training)

- Peer learning supports in higher education.
- Self-evaluation and goal setting.
- Critical thinking, metacognition, and self-regulated learning.
- Adult learning principles.

- Structuring the learning environment.
- Mentoring strategies.

Writing tutor training modules created in 2020 as part of the ITD program (Not included in Levels 1, 2, and 3 Training)

- The history of writing centres in Canada (Bell, 2020) (for writing tutors, along with weekly mentoring opportunities).
- A world Englishes approach to writing (Sabatino & Rafoth, 2012) (for writing tutors, complemented with weekly mentoring opportunities).
- A multilingual approach to writing centres and writers (Thonus, 2003, 2014) (for writing tutors, complemented with weekly mentoring opportunities).
- Tutoring scenarios (Rafoth, 2007, 2010; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2016).
- Reflecting on tutoring.

Training modules created in 2021 (Level 3 Training)

- Active learning strategies for higher education.
- Retrieval practice.
- Handling difficult tutoring situations.
- Assertiveness.
- Setting boundaries.
- Conflict resolution.
- Stress management.
- Universal design for learning (UDL).
- Cognitive bias.
- Gender identity and inclusion.
- Social justice approach to disability in higher education.