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Writing Centers and the Problem of Expertise: Knowing and Doing in Peer Tutoring

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WRITING CENTERS AND THE PROBLEM OF EXPERTISE:

KNOWING AND DOING IN PEER TUTORING

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Writing Centers and the Problem of Expertise: Knowing and Doing in Peer
        Tutoring

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        In this dissertation, I argue that writing center scholarship has not yet fully

conceptualized the kinds of knowledge and ability required for successful

performance in peer tutoring. Because writing centers are often located outside of

the disciplinary structures of the academy and, in most cases, rely on non-specialist

peer tutors, tutoring has been characterized as a primarily generalist or amateur

enterprise, set aside from more institutionally vetted forms of classroom

instruction. As a result of this distinction, writing center professionals have found it

difficult to demonstrate tutoring effectiveness in terms that translate well to other

academic contexts.

        To address this point of tension, I develop a conception of tutoring that is

grounded in studies of expert practice. In particular, by drawing on longitudinal

studies of writing development in college, I argue that tutoring can function as a

means of raising writers' awareness of disciplinary conventions as well as a means

of helping writers adapt and transform their prior knowledge to suit new contexts.

To further develop this claim, I propose the theoretical framework of "knowing" and

"doing" in peer tutoring. First, I consider how tutoring practice is shaped by

knowledge of discourse community, rhetoric, genre, subject matter, and writing

process conventions. Second, I describe the interactive dimension of peer tutoring

by drawing on studies of situated learning and cognitive apprenticeship to show that, rather than hindering writer autonomy, a tutor's full engagement in a writing conference can actually enable the writer's participation. I argue, finally, that knowing and doing are interconnected and that a fully developed theory of tutoring expertise is only possible when both perspectives are considered together.

Ultimately, I advocate for a theoretical approach that sees both writing and tutoring from a developmental perspective, one that allows us to understand how, over time, student writers and tutors can grow in ability and assume new and increasingly complex identities. In the final chapter, I recommend pedagogical strategies that writing center professionals might use to help put peer writing tutors on the path toward growing expertise.