

## Reflections on a peer-led writing café

**Emily Webb**

University of Leeds, UK

**Felicity Edwards**

University of Leeds, UK

**Zoe Harrington**

University of Leeds, UK

**Eve Middleton**

University of Leeds, UK

**Amy Somekh**

University of Leeds, UK

**Tharushi Wijesiriwardena**

University of Leeds, UK

### ***Abstract***

Academic writing can often be a solitary, even isolating, experience for students. For those new to UK higher education institutions, as well as those seeking to develop their academic skills, academic writing can be a daunting task. Supporting students with academic writing is a significant element of the work of the Learning Development team at the University of Leeds. Established methods of support, including co-curricular and embedded workshops, online resources, and one-to-one appointments, are effective, but they do little to promote a sense of community or belonging. Instead, the power dynamic between student and learning advisor remains very similar to the one students experience with academic staff. Peer support has proved to be a powerful tool in learning development, especially in academic writing (Longfellow et al., 2008; Pritchard, 2015; Tamachi et al., 2018). Building on the successes of PASS/PAL schemes and peer-led support at other institutions, the LD team at Leeds opened a Writing Café in October 2022 to support undergraduate students in the development of their academic writing. Led by

five student 'academic writing mentors', the Writing Café offers an opportunity for undergraduates to have a less isolating experience of writing while building their communities and networks within the institution.

This presentation, delivered in collaboration with our academic writing mentors, intended to reflect on the challenges, successes, and experience of the Writing Café during its first year. We have found that students valued the Writing Café for different reasons: quick access to academic writing support, an opportunity to connect with peers, and a safe space to express concerns and anxieties 'without judgement' (student feedback). It is also clear from our learnings that some elements of the Writing Café need to respond and adapt to the dynamic needs of students, as well as institutional priorities. These include the demand for online Writing Café provision, continued training and development of the academic writing mentors, and clearer communication around the purpose and benefits of the Writing Café for students. The Writing Café has been an excellent addition to the provision offered by the Learning Development team and offers an insight into ways student-led writing support can aid a sense of belonging and confidence to undergraduate students.

**Keywords:** peer-led learning; student mentors; academic writing; sense of belonging.

### ***Community response***

The session was led as a collaborative effort between the Writing Café co-ordinator and student writing mentors, which added the element of co-creation with student-mentors while offering their unique perspectives on the experience of working in the Café. The presentation attracted a range of questions from the audience, which were tackled by the multiple voices of the presenters, again representing the pluriverse of experience.

The attendees were interested in how the Writing Café manages student expectations regarding the level of intervention a writing mentor might offer (e.g. expectations around proofreading). The mentors responded by explaining their approach of 'guiding', rather than 'teaching' the students or providing them with answers, the former being a developmental approach strongly emphasised during their training. They revealed that while typical student enquiries might focus on referencing, conversations developed

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around the context of assessment and its key challenges, allowing the mentors to offer more rounded advice and direct students to relevant resources for further support with their learning.

A discussion also developed around the issues of recruitment and pay. Emily Webb explained that the Café pays mentors for their work and time, and that there is a very high interest in the role among the students (110 applications for six posts). This prompted one of the participants to comment:

This has definitely made me rethink the work we're doing with peer support. Our offering currently relies on volunteers and tends to be much more informal and directed solely by students who are interested. Formalising this, while retaining the student-led element, was an interesting consideration. Certainly something we can look into and would be interested to hear how it develops.

Another listener praised the team in the chat: 'Big respect from me that students are paid!', which generated a response from a different institution: 'We pay our Writing Mentors at Lancaster (we have a Writing Space along similar lines, I think). Writing Mentors = valued colleagues.' Both statements were met with multiple thumbs-up and heart emoticons from other participants. Similarly, the informal context of the Writing Café was appreciated by many: 'The tea or coffee bit sounds so significant. So much of the power of learning development depends on the quality of welcome/hospitality.'

Both the presenters and participants also found it important to consider the limitations and opportunities of the current set-up, with one asking whether the Writing Café 'could be delivered as a hybrid model to reach a wide audience of "non-traditional" students'. It was explained that the first step towards an online presence would be launching an email service for students, but the team is not yet prepared to follow the University of Plymouth's fully hybrid model of delivery.

Finally, a participant asked about discipline-specific barriers and the mentors shared occasional difficulties in addressing the concerns coming from an unfamiliar discipline, e.g. a history student mentor being unfamiliar with the scientific conventions required in a psychology assignment. However, they anticipated that this would be at least partially addressed by expanding mentor numbers next year and planning mentor staffing around complementary skills and disciplinary interests. They also emphasised that many student

queries relate to very generic concerns, such as essay planning or time management, where all mentors can equally assist.

Overall, both the presentation and the discussion created opportunities to share the successes (Figure 1) of the Writing Café at Leeds, as well as some of its limitations (Figure 2). The session created an atmosphere of hope for future development (especially the planned Twilight Café and Roaming Café initiatives, which could be elaborated on further) and inspired the attendees to consider the Writing Café format as a valuable support tool for student learning in their own institutions.

**Figure 1. Presenters' slide: the successes of the Writing Café at Leeds.**

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### Student Success – Formal Survey Data


- Mean score of 4.87 when asked “How helpful did you find the Writing Café?”
- 100% of students agreed that:
  - Attending the Writing Café improved their confidence with academic writing.
  - Their visit to the Writing Café had a positive impact on their assessment.
  - They would consider using the Writing Café again.

**Figure 2. Presenters' slide: some of the limitations (extrinsic) of the Writing Café at Leeds.**

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### Extrinsic Limitations

- Space & Resources
  - Tension of space use - trying to limit disruption to non-Café attendees.
  - Modification of the space with student input and offer a "Writing Café on Tour" service.
- Student & Staff Expectations vs Reality
  - Limited/ineffective communications has led to misinterpretations of the Café's role and services.
  - Clearer branding and communications to get academics on board and communicate the purpose of the café through them and through multiple other avenues.



## ***Next steps and additional questions***

It seems that the following comments and questions might be worth greater consideration by the conference presenters:

- ‘How can we manage student expectations? You mentioned it was more of a “drop in” service at the moment but you’d like to change this. What are your thoughts on how this could be done?’
- If the Writing Café becomes very popular, how will it meet student demand? And how can the writing mentors be protected from student dissatisfaction?
- What’s the best way of communicating the Writing Café’s values and purpose, both among the students and academics?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of the Roaming and Twilight Cafés?

## ***Authors’ reflections***

We deeply enjoyed delivering our paper during the conference and were delighted with the positive and engaging response we received from the audience. The discussion points and questions very much reflected many of the concerns and issues we, as a learning development team, have been considering in the last year. While the Writing Café was successful in establishing a model and demonstrating the multiple benefits of peer-led support, there were challenges and limitations we faced. One area we have been working on developing over the summer has been the ways in which we communicate the purpose and benefits of the initiative to both staff and students. We are keen for students to use the space to seek guidance from our mentors but also as a creative and collaborative space in which to write. We have therefore renamed it ‘The Writing Space’ and have been working on developing a clear guide to what the space can offer. Meetings with student education support and academic colleagues have also allowed us to explain our aims and purpose more clearly. We hope this will not only raise awareness of the initiative across campus but also help to prevent miscommunication about, and dissatisfaction with, the service.

Audience interest in, and discussion around, the accessibility of the Café, posing the idea of a hybrid service as well as the Roaming and Twilight Cafés, was also particularly interesting. We were aware from the earliest discussions that it was our ambition to follow *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Special Issue 29: October 2023

Plymouth's hybrid model, but we have more limited capacity at present. We have, however, agreed that a 'roaming' Writing Space will be open once every three weeks in the Faculty of Medicine and Health building (across campus from the libraries). We hope this will extend provision to a cohort of students who are often unable to access mainstream provision due to their clinical commitments. While this poses challenges in terms of staffing and the specificity of writing style, we hope to overcome these by recruiting students from within the faculty to focus on this outreach endeavour. This may become a model for other opportunities across campus.

Finally, the writing mentors in particular were heartened to see and hear the comments around payment of, and respect for, student colleagues. This is an integral part of the Writing Café/Space project, and we are delighted to hear of similar schemes at other institutions and widespread statements of support. Both the mentors and co-ordinator have found the development of the Writing Café to be hugely beneficial personally and professionally, and this is not something that can be overlooked. We hope to continue to employ student-staff to provide opportunities beyond the curriculum and beyond the academic to prepare our students for life beyond university.

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### ***Author details***

Emily Webb is an academic learning advisor in the Learning Development Team at the University of Leeds. She is responsible for the co-ordination of the Writing Café and the Academic Writing Mentors.

Felicity Edwards, Zoe Harrington, Eve Middleton, Amy Somekh, and Tharushi Wijesiriwardena were University of Leeds students who worked as Academic Writing Mentors during the 2022-2023 academic year.

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