

Spring 2021, Volume 1, Issue 1



The Journal of Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools

The Journal of the Secondary School Writing Centers Association



Book Review

The Rowman and Littlefield Guide for Peer Tutors

Melissa Morgan, *West Springfield High School (VA)*

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Recommended Citation

"Review: The Rowman & Littlefield Guide for Peer Tutors." *The Journal of Peer Tutoring in Secondary Schools*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, <http://sswca.org/journal/1-1/>.

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Review: The Rowman & Littlefield Guide for Peer Tutors

Melissa Morgan, *West Springfield High School (VA)*

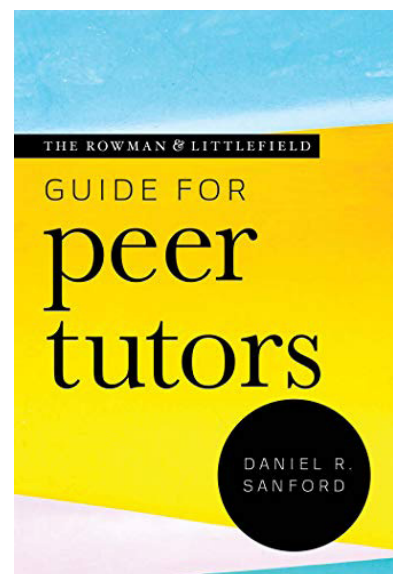
Sanford, Daniel R. *The Rowman & Littlefield Guide for Peer Tutors*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020.

The abilities to empathize and communicate with learners, as well as the abilities to question and support them as they work toward mastery, are the most important qualities a peer tutor can have. This is the claim of Dr. Daniel R. Sanford in Chapter 1 of his book *The Rowman & Littlefield Guide for Peer Tutors*. In this book, Sanford defines peer tutoring, explains the science behind learning center theory, and provides concrete steps that a learning center—also known as a peer tutoring center—can take to become a more effective, efficient, and inclusive learning environment. The foundation of this text is an exploration of “the active, collaborative pedagogy of peer tutoring” (x). Throughout each chapter, Sanford makes connections to learning center theory; he touches on everything from motivation to tutor training and center engagement.

In his foreword, Sanford notes what many directors of learning centers have found: there is very little high-quality research available focused solely on peer tutoring. I could not agree with his statement more. As a high school learning center director myself, this book has been a welcome resource. Even though I have picked core texts to use with my first- and second-year tutors—*The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and *A Training Guide for College Tutors and Peer Educators*, respectively—I have struggled to find an appropriate text for my third-year tutors without the content seeming redundant. I discovered *The Rowman and Littlefield Guide for Peer Tutors* during the pandemic quarantine and read it over the summer, hoping it would shed some new light on the subject of peer tutoring. This book did not disappoint.

The text itself is not terribly lengthy, just over 180 pages. It is an easy read for a director to read before the start of a school year, such as I did, or for a tutor to read as part of his or her tutor training. Moving forward, I intend to use this book as the core text for my third-year tutors. Sanford’s text will allow them to examine peer tutoring from new angles not shared in our other texts and yet will still pair well with the texts we already use in their first and second years, allowing us to have whole class discussions on peer tutoring topics through jigsaw or roundtable discussions.

Although I intend to use this book as a teaching tool for my tutors, it is also an excellent teaching tool for directors who are new to peer tutoring. I am in my eighth year of teaching, but in my second year of directing the learning center. I am still learning, and I appreciate the insight and instruction that Sanford presents. The information shared in this book is comprehensive, concrete, and appropriate for all those with experience in educating others. Although written for a college-level audience, the information in this text is applicable to peer tutoring at the secondary level and is an excellent resource for directors whether they are just



starting a peer-tutoring program, transitioning from a writing center, or looking to develop their already existing peer-tutoring program.

Dr. Sanford is the director of the Academic Resource Commons at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. After starting his academic career in linguistics before transitioning into learning center management, he served as the director of the Center for Academic Program Support at the University of New Mexico.

Sanford's book is more than just an implementation guide for peer-tutoring programs. It connects learning center theory and current cognitive science, explaining how the brain functions when learning and asserting the belief that peer tutors are educators meant to help individuals learn about learning. My center frequently uses the metaphor "a coach on the sidelines" to describe the role of the peer tutor. A good coach provides guidance and strategies to help his or her team perform to the best of its abilities just as a good tutor provides guidance and strategies to help a student perform to the best of his or her abilities on an assignment. Many of the students who apply to be a tutor at writing centers do so because they themselves are good students. Learning comes easy to them, but that does not mean they know how to educate. It is important for tutors to learn the pedagogy of learning because they will likely work with students in the center who are very different learners than themselves. Dr. Sanford's purpose in writing this book is to help close the gap between theory and science, consolidating the ideas relating to learning and peer tutoring into an easy-to-read, accessible guide.

There are a few sections of the book that are specifically aimed at directors of learning centers. Such is the case with the foreword, in which Sanford provides an overview of the book's structure and suggestions for how to use this book as an instructional tool. For example, Sanford directly addresses writing center directors here. Many learning centers originated from writing centers, such as the learning center at my school. While writing centers focus strictly on helping students with writing assignments, learning centers provide tutoring in all subject areas and for all assignments. Sanford refers to the space between learning centers and writing centers as a "gray area" and claims that the learning process is more or less the same regardless of the content. Therefore, in his view, this book is appropriate for directors of both centers (xii). Directors should not skip the foreword when reading this book; it is extremely helpful to know how the book is laid out before delving into the content.

Beyond the foreword, the book is divided into ten chapters, with each chapter addressing some aspect of peer tutoring. Chapter 1 is an introduction to peer tutoring, chapter 2 is an introduction to learning and the brain, and chapter 3 is an introduction to learning-center theory. These first three chapters are foundational to the book and should be read in order. Chapter 2 is by far the most "scientific" chapter as it touches on the importance of schemas, academic learning, working memory, and long-term memory. Because this is not terminology all tutors may be familiar with, it might be helpful to preteach some of this vocabulary before launching into the chapter. Chapters 4 through 9 can be read sequentially or as individual chapters depending on the needs of the center. In these chapters, Sanford addresses topics that include administrative guidance for running a center or a tutoring session, learning strategies, engaging a diverse student body, and tutoring in online environments.

Chapter 10 is primarily aimed at directors as it addresses other ways to engage tutors beyond tutoring sessions. Suggestions include requirements for tutors to observe other tutors, serve as center liaisons, create personal peer-educator statements, and design group projects for the center. For those centers where peer tutoring is a class, these suggestions are excellent opportunities for tutor evaluation and assessment; however, these activities can also be used in peer-tutoring clubs as a way to build community within the center and to promote the learning center within the school. Like many learning and writing centers, the pandemic has significantly limited tutoring opportunities for my tutors. Because of this, I have needed to become more creative in my instruction and tutor training, and the suggested activities in chapter 10 have been a valued addition to my curriculum.

I did not have the opportunity to read the book with my tutors this school year, but that did not stop me from using this text. For one class activity, I had my tutors develop a personal peer-educator statement. We

linked these statements to our website so teachers and students could learn more about the tutors. It also provided tutors an opportunity to reflect and served as a midyear assessment in the gradebook. For another activity, tutors created Hyperdocs using Bloom's Taxonomy. The English Department had asked tutors to develop materials to help students review for the state writing exam. I used Sanford's explanation of Bloom's Taxonomy as the basis of my instruction, and then I let my tutors create. Both of these activities were inspired by the book and are activities that I would do again. Next year, I plan to have my new tutors complete the activities in the beginning of the book related to center administration while my returning tutors focus on those activities related to learning and brain science, allowing both groups to appropriately develop their tutoring understanding and authority.

While some of the topics addressed in this book may be found in other scholarly resources such as the Secondary School Writing Center Association's toolkit, the International Writing Center Association's journal *The Peer Review*, or the website *The Peer Tutoring Resource Center*, what sets this book apart are the many opportunities for extension and reflection that Sanford provides in addition to his instruction. Throughout the chapters, Sanford has embedded short passages and resources related to a chapter's topic. These passages may be skipped without losing any of the content; however, if read, these passages provide meaningful opportunities for directors and tutors to make text-to-world connections.

Of particular interest to my own tutors were "What If I Don't Know the Answer?," "The Zone of Proximal Development," "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Microaggressions," and "Antiracism." These extension passages are based on the work of other scholars, allowing for cross-content connection. For example, the extension on antiracism is based on the work of Ibram X. Kendi, a well-known scholar and leader in antiracist pedagogy. After sharing Kendi's work with the reader, Sanford then connects antiracism and peer tutoring, bridging together these two seemingly unrelated topics.

While these extension passages are wonderful supplements, they are not the only chance for extension and reflection. Additional opportunities can be found at the end of each chapter as Sanford lists questions for discussion, class activities, and questions for reflection. I have appreciated these end-of-chapter questions as I adapt my curriculum to fit a virtual-learning environment. I have used these questions as "bell ringer" activities, exit tickets, and small group discussions. Although not all of the activities lend themselves to the virtual-learning environment, most are possible through programs like Jamboard, Padlet, Peardeck, or the Google Workspace for Education. Regardless of the learning environment, these activities can be used to foster class discussion, promote critical thinking, and increase tutor engagement in the learning center.

While Sanford's book has many strengths beyond what has been covered, for the purpose of this journal, there is one glaring weakness: it is written for a higher education learning center. Although much of what is shared can be used in high school learning centers, using this text as a resource for tutors in a middle school learning center would be difficult. At the high school level this book could be used as a course text for advanced tutors; however, speaking as a former middle school teacher and current high school teacher, I do not believe this book is entirely accessible for middle school students. The language and depth in which each topic is explored is a bit advanced. Nevertheless, I recommend directors read this book regardless of whether they lead a high school learning center or a middle school learning center as adaptations can be made to address both environments. Do not let the intended audience of this book turn you off from reading it.

In conclusion, I recommend this book to learning and writing center directors (both novice and expert), peer tutors, and everyone in between. While my school already has a very strong peer-tutoring program, this book has changed how I teach my tutors about learning and tutoring. Peer tutoring is more than just wanting to help people. It is about going back to those four qualities listed at the beginning of this article: empathy, communication, questioning, and support. Sanford's text teaches directors and tutors how to embed those qualities in their learning (or writing) center while also running an efficient organization. I highly recommend adding this book to your classroom or professional library.

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Melissa Morgan is an English teacher and the Director of Peer Tutoring at West Springfield High School in West Springfield, Virginia. A native of the Washington, D.C. metro-area, she loves living by the nation's capital and enjoys all of the cultural, academic, and recreational activities it affords. Melissa has a master's degree in Special Education from George Mason University and bachelor's degree in Communications from Brigham Young University.