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Research Article

Balancing ethics and support: Peer tutors' experiences with AI tools in student writing

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ABSTRACT

Like many student writing centers, the American University of Sharjah Writing Center is seeing a rise in student reliance upon generative AI (GenAI) tools, which are artificial intelligence systems capable of generating human-like text. Peer tutors frequently seek guidance on how to approach student papers involving GenAI tools such as ChatGPT, yet writing centers have offered relatively little direction on this emerging issue. Our study examines the challenges peer tutors encounter when addressing AI use in student writing, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate these issues. A focus group discussion with peer tutors and an analysis of a collaborative document co-developed by the peer tutors provided insights into their experiences. Findings reveal that peer tutors encounter difficulties when students use ChatGPT covertly, struggle with ethical concerns about hiding AI involvement, and report inconsistencies in faculty policies regarding AI use, making it difficult to offer consistent advice to their students. To address these challenges, peer tutors encourage students to disclose their use of AI, explore their motivations for using it, and discuss both the benefits and limitations of AI tools. They emphasize students' potential, encourage rewriting and revising AI-generated content, promote learning and independence over AI reliance, engage in discussions about ethical considerations, and advise adherence to professors' guidelines. This research will contribute to developing practical guidelines for responding to AI in writing centers and provide peer tutors with the tools they need to navigate these changes. The study's findings will also contribute to the evolving dialogue on academic integrity and the role of AI in higher education.

Keywords: generative AI, GenAI, AI, AI tools, writing center pedagogy, ChatGPT in education, academic integrity, AI in student writing

INTRODUCTION

At the American University of Sharjah (AUS) Writing Center, we have been grappling with the increasing prevalence of generative AI (GenAI) (or AI) use in student academic writing, a trend mirrored in writing centers around the world (Lindberg & Domingues, 2024). Writing centers face new opportunities and challenges as AI tools like ChatGPT become more common. These tools can offer students immediate help with their writing, but they also raise questions about how peer tutors should approach sessions when AI tools have been involved. As part of a Facebook group of writing center directors from across the world, I have noticed that many centers are currently navigating these changes, with discussions on AI becoming a frequent topic of concern (Directors of Writing Centers Facebook, n.d.). Despite these conversations, few resources address GenAI use in writing centers; most focus on the use of Grammarly (Bryan, 2023; Zhang et al., 2020).

In the Fall of 2023, peer tutors at the AUS Writing Center began raising daily questions about handling AI-generated papers. Common concerns included how to respond when a student disclosed that ChatGPT had written their entire paper or how to adjust writing to sound less AI-generated. These discussions extended into our staff meetings, where peer tutors began sharing their experiences using ChatGPT in sessions. As these conversations grew, it became clear that the writing center required clear guidelines for AI use. However, beyond a blog post by Deans et al. (2023), few resources specifically addressed AI's role in writing centers. To fill this gap, a collaboration was formed between a writing center director, a faculty colleague, and a peer tutor who had researched AI in writing centers during his training. As part of this collaboration, a focus group discussion was held with tutorial staff, followed by a brainstorming session with peer tutors to co-develop GenAI guidelines for writing center staff and to ensure that their experiences and needs informed the guidelines. This research aims to contribute to the development of practical guidelines for responding to AI in writing centers and to provide peer tutors with the necessary tools to adapt to these changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Writing Center Tutoring Practices

Writing centers and university academic support departments that deliver one-on-one tutoring designed to help students succeed in writing have traditionally encouraged a student-centered approach. Most writing centers are committed to a constructivist learning model that advocates a collaborative approach to tutoring sessions (Carino, 2003; Corbett, 2008). A non-directive, collaborative approach encourages peer tutors to use non-directive strategies, questioning writers about their goals while requiring students to take an active role and assume responsibility for their writing.

The widespread use of AI tools in writing, however, has significantly impacted the writing center model, challenging traditional approaches to student engagement and learning. GenAI challenges the traditional approach in the writing center because students may use AI to create content rather than develop their thinking and writing through discussion and revision. The collaborative approach to tutoring, which advocates for students to retain ownership of their writing, is at odds with a tutorial scenario in which AI-generated text is the starting point. The challenge for writing centers is to integrate AI tools without sacrificing critical thinking and reflection from student-tutor conversations. As students begin to incorporate AI-generated content into their writing, writing centers may need to adapt their pedagogical frameworks to ensure that AI does not replace the collaborative learning process but is used to enhance it.

Technological Shifts in Writing Centers

How writing centers have adapted to previous technological changes can offer guidance on responding effectively to this new technology. In his review, Bryan (2023) discusses how writing centers have historically navigated technological changes by evaluating both the benefits and limitations of these writing tools. They have succeeded in implementing technological software while simultaneously balancing these tools with the tutor feedback essential for student writing development. Just as Grammarly reshaped student engagement with writing feedback when it first emerged, digital tools like AI-powered writing assistants are now influencing how students approach the writing process (Zhang et al., 2020). Research has shown that while tools like Grammarly can be helpful for final edits, especially for second-language learners, they often fall short in addressing higher-order concerns such as organization, argument development, and voice (Zhang et al., 2020). As Zhang et al. concluded in their study, even though Grammarly was convenient, students continued using writing centers for customized, personal feedback that tools like Grammarly could not provide. Dembsey (2017) elaborated on Grammarly's limitations by noting that its feedback is often repetitive, inaccurate, or lacking the contextual awareness that human tutors offer in writing centers; Grammarly cannot replicate the type of interaction students receive from tutor feedback. The introduction of GenAI tools is even more disruptive than tools like Grammarly because not only do they correct students' writing, but they also generate large passages of text. If students rely on AI, they may miss out on learning through conversation and critical thinking, which are central to writing center practices.

Challenges of AI in the Writing Center

Observations from the writing center in this study indicate that one of the most challenging aspects of AI is how peer tutors handle situations in which tutees conceal their use of AI. Writing centers are student-centered spaces where students develop their writing skills while conversing with their peer tutors. Many writing center professionals have noted that this model cannot function when there are questions about the authorship of a text (Barrot, 2023; Deans et al., 2023; Essid, 2023; Lindberg & Domingues, 2024; Stowe, 2023). Moreover, AI tools like ChatGPT have been known to fabricate information and generate non-existent sources, which makes it an even more complex ethical dilemma for peer tutors to address (Deans et al., 2023; Lindberg & Domingues, 2024). Another challenge identified in our writing center is the inconsistency in policies and guidelines in our institution regarding AI use, a problem prevalent in other universities as well (Lindberg & Domingues, 2024). Although some universities have created institution-wide policies, most, including this institution, have relied on individual instructors to make decisions about how AI will be used in their classrooms (Hicks, 2024). This inconsistency confuses students, peer tutors, and faculty alike, as students may be unsure when and how to use AI tools (Chan & Hu, 2024; Črček & Patekar, 2023). Writing centers must help peer tutors navigate these complex ethical dilemmas so that students can engage with AI in an academically honest way.

Writing Centers' Role in AI Literacy

While AI tools can support the development of students' writing skills, their effective use also depends on a pedagogy that emphasizes critical thinking as well as AI literacy. Many scholars emphasize that writing instructors/peer tutors must guide students in using AI ethically to ensure that these tools are used to complement, rather than replace, human creativity and critical thinking (Barrot, 2023; Creely, 2024; Essid, 2023; Lindberg & Domingues, 2024; Söğüt, 2024). Lindberg and Domingues' (2024) study with writing center administrators highlighted the importance of teaching students to use AI responsibly. They recommend that peer tutors guide students to evaluate AI-generated content critically, ensuring it does not replace their ideas and voices.

Writing centers can be ideal hubs for developing critical AI literacy by teaching how to use AI ethically and effectively (Essid, 2023; Hicks, 2024). Bryan (2023) argues that writing centers have historically thrived when positioned as spaces for critical inquiry into both writing practices and technological advancements. Peer tutors, administrators, and researchers collaborate to explore the pedagogical implications of technology and ensure that the introduction of new tools is accompanied by critical engagement and reflection. This approach allows writing centers to be active agents in shaping how new technologies, like AI, are used in educational settings.

Although research on writing center-specific strategies for addressing and integrating AI remains limited, broader studies in educational and pedagogical contexts can provide insight into possible approaches. Research has shown that personalized feedback and confidence-building strategies help students develop self-efficacy in writing and reduce over-reliance on AI-generated content (Chauke, 2024). Studies also highlight the importance of revision strategies to ensure clarity and originality in AI-assisted writing (Playfoot et al., 2024; Rowland, 2023). Additionally, research on AI literacy emphasizes the benefits of engaging students in discussions about AI's capabilities and limitations, to ensure that they critically evaluate its role in their learning rather than using it as a substitute for original thought (Cotton et al., 2024; Luo, 2024). Writing centers can draw on these findings to develop AI literacy programs and to help students use AI as a tool for learning rather than dependency (Birks & Clare, 2023). However, more research is needed to explore how these strategies can be effectively applied in writing center contexts.

As the use of AI in academic settings increases, writing centers must develop best practices for integrating these tools in ways that support learning while maintaining academic integrity. This process involves both addressing immediate concerns about AI-written texts and developing long-term strategies for training peer tutors and supporting students. There remains a gap in formal research on AI's impact in writing centers. This study serves as a step in filling this gap and offers insights into the role of peer tutors and practical recommendations for future research.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This study examines the challenges posed by AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, in writing center sessions and how peer tutors respond to these issues. The research questions explore peer tutors' strategies for addressing AI-assisted writing, the difficulties they encounter, and how they adapt their tutoring approaches. By investigating how peer tutors navigate AI-related concerns in student writing, this study aims to improve tutoring practices and better equip peer tutors for technological shifts that affect academic writing. The findings will inform the development of education and guidelines on AI usage in the writing center peer tutor training course, with the long-term goal of integrating a dedicated AI unit to help peer tutors engage with AI-assisted writing effectively and responsibly.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What challenges do peer tutors face when students use GenAI in their writing center sessions?
2. How do peer tutors effectively address and manage challenges posed by GenAI?

METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the design of the research, the population and sample of the study, the instruments, procedures, and data analysis.

Context: AUS Writing Center

Our university operates as an English-medium institution with a diverse international student body located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Within this multilingual context, the writing center is committed to enhancing students' writing skills and providing support across various disciplines. Modeled after the evolving American writing center approach, peer tutors engage in one-on-one sessions to assist students with a wide range of assignments, from writing composition tasks to presentations, lab reports, and research theses. Faculty members often encourage students to seek help from the center, where they work collaboratively with peer tutors to improve content, organization, clarity, and mechanics. Currently, the writing center employs twenty-five peer tutors and conducts approximately 3,000 to 3,500 appointments annually, offering in-person sessions throughout the week and synchronous online sessions on weekends.

Population and Sample

Participants for the survey, focus group discussion, and collaborative document were recruited from the peer tutoring staff at the university's writing center. These peer tutors, typically bilingual and academically high achieving, are selected from undergraduate writing composition courses or the Master of Arts in teaching English as a second language program. To prepare for their roles, they undergo a semester-long, credit-bearing training course that equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to support students effectively in the writing center.

After receiving IRB approval, purposive sampling was used. A survey was sent to the writing center staff to determine which peer tutors were interested in GenAI and had encountered it in their sessions. Peer tutors were asked whether they were interested in participating in a focus group discussion about GenAI. If they responded "yes," they were contacted again to confirm their continued interest in participating. Twelve peer tutors volunteered, but ten participated in the discussion because of time conflicts. Research has suggested that the ideal focus group size is between six to ten participants. This range ensures diversity of perspectives while allowing each participant enough time to contribute fully (Freitas et al.,1998). As summarized in **Table 1**, the focus group comprised ten peer tutors with varying levels of experience in the Writing Center. They came from a variety of majors.

A document written by the writing center tutorial staff during a staff meeting was analyzed. Of our 25 peer tutors on staff, 22 actively participated in developing guidelines for using GenAI tools in the writing center. The peer tutorial staff involved in creating the document represent a diverse mix of backgrounds, skills, and tutoring experience, which is summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 1. Demographic information for the focused group discussion participants (n = 10)

Variables		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Major	Architecture	2	20
	Computer science	2	20
	English	2	30
	Industrial engineering	2	20
	Journalism	1	10
	Psychology	1	10
Standing	Junior	6	60
	Senior	3	40
	Fifth year	1	10
Semesters at the writing center	1	1	10
	2	4	40
	3	1	10
	4	3	30
	> 4	1	10
Sex	Female	9	90
	Male	1	10
Nationality	Egyptian	4	40
	Indian	1	10
	Lebanese	1	10
	Palestinian	1	10
	Pakistani	1	10
	Sudanese	1	10
	Tunisian	1	10

Table 2. Demographic information for the collaborative document discussion participants (n = 21)

Variables		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Major	Biology	2	10
	Chemical Engineering	1	5
	Computer Engineering	1	5
	Computer Science	1	5
	Economics	1	5
	English	4	20
	Environmental Science	1	5
	Industrial Engineering	4	20
	International Studies	3	15
	Journalism	1	5
	Psychology	2	10
Standing	Junior	12	60
	Senior	9	40
Semesters at the writing center	1	6	30
	2	5	25
	3	3	15
	4	2	10
	> 4	5	25
Sex	Female	19	90.5
	Male	2	9.5
Nationality	Egyptian	3	14.2
	Indian	5	23.8
	Lebanese	2	9.5
	Pakistani	2	9.5
	Palestinian	5	23.8
	Sudanese	1	4.8
	Tunisian	1	4.8
	Turkish	1	4.8

Instruments

Two research instruments were used to collect data: a focus group discussion and a collaborative document.

Focus group discussion

After obtaining written consent from the ten peer tutors, a two-hour focus group discussion was conducted in a quiet room at the back of the writing center in March 2024. To ensure confidentiality, both participants and the university were assigned pseudonyms. Participants were also informed that their responses would be anonymized and handled with strict confidentiality. Focus groups offer many advantages in seeking in-depth understanding because they allow participants to interact with one another and generate richer data through group dynamics. According to Kitzinger (1995), the method taps into group interaction, revealing shared values, opinions, and experiences that may not emerge in individual interviews. This interactive environment enables a collective exploration of the topic, encouraging participants to ask questions, exchange ideas, and provide feedback. This is particularly useful when researching new topics, like the use of AI in writing center tutoring, as the group can help generate diverse perspectives and stimulate discussion (Kitzinger, 1995). Furthermore, focus groups can facilitate participation from individuals reluctant to engage in one-on-one interviews, offering a less formal environment that encourages open conversation (Gill & Baillie, 2018).

The focus group dynamics created a lively and engaging atmosphere, which encouraged participants to discuss their experiences with AI in a way that may not have emerged in individual interviews. Questions such as "Have you faced any challenges with students using AI (or ChatGPT) in their writing? If so, could you elaborate on the challenges you've faced and share your strategies for effectively addressing or managing these challenges?" prompted thoughtful discussion. The interactive format prompted deeper reflection on AI's challenges and opportunities in their tutoring sessions. It allowed the peer tutors to question each other, share practical strategies, and even challenge assumptions about AI use. This method was particularly effective for gathering rich, in-depth data because it facilitated the exploration of how peer tutors are incorporating AI into their practices and how they are navigating ethical concerns about its use. The discussions were often spontaneous, with peer tutors reacting to one another's comments, leading to new questions and insights that might not have arisen in more structured formats. Moreover, the focus group was an effective method for collecting information about the peer tutors' experiences. It allowed for a collective exploration of this emerging topic and provided a collaborative space for participants to brainstorm and reflect on AI's role in writing centers. The discussion was recorded and then transcribed.

Collaborative staff meeting document

The collaborative document functioned similarly to a focus group by creating a dynamic platform where peer tutors could respond to one another's ideas, reveal shared values, and collaboratively explore complex issues with AI in the writing center (Kitzinger, 1995). The staff meeting was held one month after the focus group discussion in April 2024, and the discussion informed the questions to prompt discussion with the focus group. The goal of the meeting was to find out how peer tutors handle the challenges they face with AI in their sessions and to contribute towards creating a set of guidelines for AI use in the writing center. Peer tutors were able to contribute their ideas and insights using a shared Google document. This open document served as a real-time discussion space in which each staff member contributed written responses to structured prompts on addressing challenges with AI in writing center tutorials. Prompts such as "What steps can peer tutors take to manage sessions where students conceal their use of AI?" and "How can peer tutors respond when students seek help in making their writing sound less like AI-generated text?" elicited extensive discussion and generated a wide range of responses. As the conversation unfolded, all participants wrote their insights about their approaches, challenges, and strategies, producing a rich, qualitative dataset of diverse experiences. The digital format allowed peer tutors to engage in real-time discussions, share diverse perspectives and build on each other's contributions as they wrote their responses.

Table 3. Responses to AI challenges extracted from the collaborative document: Total number of mentions, frequencies of tutors per theme, and percentages

Variables		Total mentions	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Themes	Encouraging open disclosure	16	10	10
	Exploring student motivation for AI use	16	11	5
	Discussing benefits and limitations of AI	25	13	5
	Emphasizing students' potential	13	11	5
	Emphasizing learning over dependency	9	7	20
	Supporting revision and rewriting	30	19	5
	Reminding students about academic integrity and ethical guidelines	16	11	20
	Adhering to faculty guidelines	10	10	15
Total		135	92	100

Data Analysis

The focus group discussion and collaborative document were transcribed, and the data were entered into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, for analysis. The focus group transcript and contributions in the collaborative document were systematically analyzed using Atlas.ti to identify key themes and patterns. This software facilitated the organization and coding of data, making it easier to draw insights from the qualitative input. The collaborative document, which captured the real-time exchanges and ideas shared by peer tutors during a staff meeting, complemented the focus group data. Together, these two sources provided a broad view of peer tutors' perspectives on AI use in the writing center and allowed for an exploration of how they discussed challenges and best practices.

Following Hycner's (1985) guidelines for phenomenological data analysis, the essence of the data was preserved while applying a systematic approach to ensure both authenticity and rigor (Cohen et al., 2018). Hycner (1985) recommends first "delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question" (p. 284). After the transcriptions from the interviews and focus group discussions were independently reviewed, patterns in the peer tutors' comments were identified to establish broad themes and develop interconnected ones. Additionally, in accordance with Hycner's (1985) approach, redundancies were eliminated, units of relevant meaning were clustered, and themes were determined from these clusters (p. 286). The related patterns were then organized into sub-themes.

For the collaborative document data, both the number of peer tutors who referenced each theme and the frequency of their mentions were tracked. However, this method was not applied to the focus group data due to the interactive nature of the discussion. Peer tutors often conveyed agreement through non-verbal cues, and the conversational format made it unnecessary for participants to raise the same points repeatedly. Atlas.ti played a crucial role in the analysis by automatically color-coding the emerging themes and sub-themes and calculating their frequency. This process was iterative and reflexive, involving weekly discussions to review the coding. Few disagreements (80% reliability) arose regarding how the peer tutors' ideas were labeled. After thorough dialogue, a consensus was reached on the final coding of themes and sub-themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges With Student AI Use

The section below explores the significant challenges faced by peer tutors that emerged from the focus group discussion data. In response to the first research question, "What challenges do peer tutors face when students use GenAI in their writing center sessions?" the analysis of the focus group discussion data revealed recurring challenges, such as detecting AI-generated essays, handling requests to humanize AI-generated content, and responding to inconsistent university or faculty AI guidelines. The collaborative document did not contain responses about the challenges they faced.

Navigating AI Detection

A significant issue that peer tutors face is managing students' use of AI in their writing (**Table 3**). It is challenging for the peer tutors to identify AI-generated content while at the same time maintaining a trusting,

supportive relationship. Peer tutors often detect AI use through inconsistencies between students' writing and verbal communication abilities. One peer tutor noted that her student's writing was so much worse, or different than the quality of writing in their paper, which prompted her to ask how the student had written it. Another peer tutor noted that she could pick up on AI use through repeated AI patterns: "Sometimes sentences will start with the same thing over and over because [AI] is not able to detect that … But when I asked her [about it], she really didn't even respond." Scenarios like these where the peer tutor plays detective can harm the foundational rapport and trust in writing center tutoring. Research suggests that a policing approach to AI detection can erode trust in academic settings (Luo, 2024). This concern is reflected in Luo's findings as well: peer tutors feel conflicted when attempting to address suspected AI use without alienating students. Instead of assuming a surveillance role, peer tutors advocate open discussions about AI use, reinforcing the importance of writing as a developmental process.

Requests to Humanize AI Content

Another issue that peer tutors raised in the focus group discussion was the discomfort they experienced when students requested assistance in concealing their use of ChatGPT in their writing. As one tutor said, students will often ask her to humanize their texts. She remembered a specific instance: "I think one notable one was … a guy, and he declared it … 'I wrote it from ChatGPT; I would like you to change it in a way that it doesn't sound like ChatGPT.'" Such requests place peer tutors in a difficult position, as they are caught between their desire to support students and their responsibility to uphold academic integrity. This situation presents an ethical challenge for writing center peer tutors who strive to meet student needs without encouraging misconduct. Cotton et al. (2024) similarly found that students sometimes misuse AI as a shortcut rather than a learning tool, prompting educators to reframe AI as a supplement to student writing rather than a substitute. Our study found that peer tutors address this challenge by engaging students in discussions about the limitations of AI, encouraging them to revise AI-generated drafts rather than passively accepting them (Rowland, 2023).

Inconsistent Faculty Guidelines

A major issue that emerged in the focus group discussion was the inconsistency in faculty and university-wide guidelines regarding the use of AI tools. Peer tutors dealt with varying policies, ranging from strict bans to unrestricted use. As a peer tutor noted, "This [inconsistency]… makes it difficult for us because there is no one standard that we have to follow, and … [this] makes me feel a little bit like sometimes I don't even know what advice to give." This challenge aligns with research that emphasizes how inconsistent AI guidelines create confusion, ethical dilemmas, and risks to academic integrity, which demonstrate the need for clear, consistent policies (Chan & Hu, 2023; Črček & Patekar, 2023; Lingard, 2023).

Responding to ChatGPT Usage

The section below discusses how peer tutors respond to the challenges they face with GenAI in their sessions. In response to the second research question, "How do peer tutors effectively manage challenges of GenAI in their sessions?" the analysis of the focus group discussion and collaborative document data (**Table 3**) revealed various strategies that peer tutors have developed. Peer tutors respond to AI use by encouraging open disclosure, exploring student motivation for AI use, emphasizing student potential, reinforcing learning, discussing AI limitations, supporting revision and rewriting, and reminding their students about academic integrity. The peer tutors guide their students to use AI in ways that promote engagement without undermining their development as writers.

Encouraging Open Disclosure

Peer tutors shared how they respond when they detect AI writing in their students' papers (**Table 3**). Many suggested they respond to AI use by initiating a discussion and encouraging honest disclosure. Their approach emphasizes being approachable and non-confrontational. In the focus group discussion, a tutor described how she might handle suspected AI use:

> I would start off by being very non-confrontational. I would ask them if they had anything else to share and then gently remind them that it is very obvious to tutors and professors when students use AI.

By prompting students with this direct yet supportive approach, she finds that students often open up, explaining their reasons for using AI and describing how they used it. Another peer tutor noted in a collaborative document, "I try to ask them if they've had help with this paper in a friendly manner. This gets them to maybe open up about how they've used AI or even a friend's help." By using friendly, open-ended questions, peer tutors encourage students to feel comfortable engaging in discussions about AI, which can lead to deeper reflections on its role in their learning. This peer-based, non-judgmental approach is also found in the current literature on AI and academic integrity. Shahzad et al. (2024) emphasize that students are more likely to adopt AI responsibly when educators encourage reflection and autonomy.

By positioning themselves as supportive collaborators rather than enforcers, peer tutors create an environment of "two-way transparency" (Luo, 2024). This mutual trust allows for honest discussions around AI use and minimizes fears of judgment or disciplinary consequences. In line with Luo's (2024) findings, peer tutors in our center frame their inquiries as a friendly curiosity rather than accusations, helping students feel safe sharing their experiences with AI and supporting a reflective, ethical approach to AI-assisted learning.

Exploring Student Motivation for AI Use

Peer tutors emphasized the importance of understanding why their students used AI (**Table 3**). This approach allows peer tutors to connect with students on a personal level and ensures that their students' concerns about AI use are acknowledged and addressed. By understanding the motivations behind the student's use of ChatGPT, peer tutors can tailor their guidance accordingly. For example, a peer tutor recalled an incident where her tutee's essay seemed original:

> However, the writing in the introduction seemed automated: I asked very casually just to not alarm her, 'By the way, the introduction, how did you write it? Did you use … any tool?' and she was like 'Yeah, I used ChatGPT.' So, then I said, 'Why?' First, I wanted to understand because they have different motivations … she said, 'I just didn't know how I should write the introduction for a critique.' 'OK, fair,' I said. 'Is there any other paragraph written by ChatGPT?', and she said, 'No … this was the only one', and it aligned with what I predicted.

Similarly, in the collaborative document, a peer tutor wrote, "I try to understand why they used ChatGPT in the first place–whether it was because they were stuck, or they thought it would save time. Then, I work with them to move beyond that." Research has also shown that by understanding students' reasons for using AI, educators can provide more personalized guidance and support that encourages ethical AI use and independent learning (Chan & Hu, 2023; Vetter et al., 2024). For example, Črček and Patekar (2023) argue that when educators take the time to understand why students are using AI tools, they can address the root causes, such as lack of confidence, time management issues, or difficulty in starting assignments. This approach helps clarify the ethical boundaries of AI use and also encourages students to see AI as a supportive tool.

Discussing Benefits and Limitations of AI

Peer tutors mentioned engaging students in discussions about the benefits and limitations of ChatGPT (**Table 3**) when responding to requests to humanize AI written content. In the focus group discussion, a tutor explained,

> If there is a particular aspect they like about the generated text, we analyze it together and learn to incorporate it intentionally into original writing. The same applies for negative points, asking them to critique AI texts and learn what not to do. Showing the flaws of AI helps as well, proving it can be far from perfect.

Another tutor in the collaborative document explained, "We talk about how ChatGPT can help with organization or giving feedback, but it shouldn't replace their own critical thinking." These kinds of balanced

discussions help students understand that while AI has its uses, it lacks the ability to generate truly original thought, develop nuanced arguments, or understand context (Luo, 2024; Playfoot et al., 2024). This approach aligns with research highlighting the benefits of open dialogue about AI's capabilities and limitations. Studies by Chan and Hu (2023), Lingard (2023), Črček and Patekar (2023), and Cotton et al. (2024) all emphasize that honest discussions help students better understand how to use AI tools ethically and responsibly. By demystifying AI's role and encouraging critical evaluation, these conversations promote transparent academic practices and support the development of students' independent thinking. Peer tutors emphasized that AI could serve as a tool to enhance writing, but students should critically evaluate and revise AI-generated text to maintain authenticity and coherence (Rowland, 2023; Shahzad et al., 2024). This approach is consistent with the writing center's broader mission to develop critical thinking.

Emphasizing Students' Potential

Responses on the collaborative document demonstrated that peer tutors emphasize their students' potential during sessions to help them understand that they do not need to depend on AI for their writing skills (**Table 3**). Peer tutors reassure students of their own writing abilities by encouraging them to trust their voice and avoid over-reliance on AI. As one tutor pointed out, "I remind students that ChatGPT can't replace their own thinking and that they can create something unique. I want them to see their own potential as writers." By emphasizing the student's strengths and encouraging them to rely on their abilities, peer tutors help students build confidence in their writing. This approach aligns with findings from Javaid et al. (2023), who found that drawing attention to students' strengths helps them recognize their potential as independent writers while using AI tools primarily for brainstorming. Peer tutors also focus on building students' confidence by complimenting their original work and guiding them to improve their writing skills without AI. Another peer tutor wrote, "I made sure to compliment the sections they wrote themselves, saying, 'This part really shines–let's build on that.'" This focus on student empowerment can help students avoid over-reliance on AI and develop their voice as writers. Chauke (2024) emphasizes that validating students' original ideas promotes motivation and greater self-confidence in writing and reinforces the importance of student-driven content. Research by Rowland (2023) and Shahzad et al. (2024) emphasizes the importance of peer tutors reinforcing students' capacity to develop original thought and independent writing skills, positioning AI as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, human creativity.

Emphasizing Learning Over Dependency

Peer tutors advise students against using AI tools due to their potential drawbacks, such as preventing students from thinking creatively and critically (**Table 3**). In the focus group, the same peer tutor from above who detected AI writing in the student's introduction, shared how she used an approach to encourage learning rather than dependence. Instead of advising the student against using ChatGPT, she guided her on how to prompt the tool to learn the components of a practical introduction rather than having it generate the entire section for her. The peer tutor explained, "I didn't tell [her] don't use it … I told her, 'You have to use it in a way that helps you build the skill." In the collaborative document, peer tutors also mentioned using the same approach: "I tell students that they should only use ChatGPT as a tool to enhance their writing, not as something that replaces their own effort. Writing is about growth, and AI can't do that for them."

This guidance from peer tutors helps shift students' mindsets from reliance on technology to self-development. The literature supports this approach: over-reliance on tools like ChatGPT can undermine the development of critical skills, encouraging passive dependence on technology rather than active learning (Garcia Castro et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2024). Peer tutors also found that when students became overly dependent on AI, their ability to structure arguments and develop analytical skills declined. This echoes findings from Luo (2024) and Rowland (2023)**,** who argue that AI should not substitute foundational writing processes. By encouraging students to use AI as a tool rather than a substitute, peer tutors can promote independent growth and critical thinking skills (Birks & Clare, 2023; Essid, 2023; Playfoot et al., 2024; Utami et al., 2023).

Supporting Revision and Rewriting

Peer tutors support their students in revising and rewriting AI-generated text (**Table 3**). One tutor explained during the focus group discussion, "When students come in with AI-generated text, I help them rework it to fit their own voice. ChatGPT can't personalize things, so we work on revision to make it more authentic." By assisting students in revising their AI-generated drafts, peer tutors help ensure that the final product reflects the student's understanding and creativity rather than merely relying on AI. Research by Rowland (2023), Playfoot et al. (2024), and Luo (2024) supports this approach by emphasizing that AI should function as an initial brainstorming tool, but that revision must remain student driven.

In the collaborative document, a peer tutor said she encourages students to rewrite: "Ask them to explain that specific topic and ask them if they have sources to back up their points. Once they explain it and they have also done their research on the topic, usually we could tell them that they can write it on their own since they just explained it to us." This strategy emphasizes the importance of making AI-generated content more personal and aligned with the students' unique expressions. Shahzad et al. (2024) emphasize that peer tutors should challenge students to articulate their ideas rather than simply polishing AI-generated content. Moreover, this study's findings align with Cotton et al. (2024), who highlight that AI often struggles with higher-order writing concerns such as argument development and logical consistency. Peer tutors in this study addressed these limitations by guiding students in restructuring AI-generated text to enhance clarity and persuasiveness, reinforcing Luo's (2024) argument that AI should serve as a writing assistant rather than a primary content creator.

Reminding Students About Academic Integrity and Ethical Guidelines

Peer tutors reported emphasizing to their students the importance of academic integrity and ethical guidelines when they noticed GenAI in students' written work (see **Table 3**). In the focus group discussion, they mentioned cautioning their students about "getting into trouble" and that there are "detection tools" to deter them from AI use. In the collaborative document, a tutor shared, "I've had to explain to students that using ChatGPT to write entire papers is a form of academic dishonesty, and it's not acceptable under our university's guidelines." This comment demonstrates how tutors assume responsibility for clarifying the ethical boundaries of using AI when students misunderstand or misuse their capabilities. The research has stressed the need for educators to prevent the misuse of AI tools by communicating clearly with their students about ethical and appropriate ways in which to use these tools (Aldossary et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2024; Vetter, 2024). This study's findings revealed that students often expressed uncertainty regarding AI policies, mirroring concerns raised by Chan and Hu (2023) and Črček and Patekar (2023), who found that unclear institutional AI guidelines contribute to ethical dilemmas. Tutors in this study responded by encouraging students to consult their instructors and institutions for AI-use policies, which reinforces Barrot's (2023) assertion that transparency is essential in addressing AI-related concerns. Additionally, this study found that peer tutors frequently prompted students to critically reflect on whether their AI use aligns with academic integrity standards. Shahzad et al. (2024) supports this approach by emphasizing that direct discussions about ethical concerns improve student awareness and accountability.

Adhering To Faculty Guidelines

Peer tutors propose adhering to faculty instructions for handling the challenge of inconsistent guidelines on AI use (**Table 3**). In the focus group discussion, a tutor discussed a challenging scenario with his student who wanted to know to what extent he could use ChatGPT for his writing: "There I really got stumped. I didn't know… necessarily what professors allowed … I remember asking, 'What does your professor think about this?'" When faculty guidelines are unclear or inconsistent, asking students directly about their professors' specific policies is important. By asking about specific course policies, tutors can tailor their advice to align with the expectations set by individual instructors and minimize potential conflict between student work and faculty expectations.

One tutor emphasizes this approach in the collaborative document: "It's definitely a case-by-case, so it depends on the professor's guidelines regarding the use of AI. If tutees were uncertain, I would encourage them to clarify with their professor. But even so, I think I would just remind them on how to ethically use AI

and cite sources properly." This approach ensures that the tutor's guidance aligns with course-specific policies and also reinforces broader principles of ethical AI use and proper citation practices. Similarly, the research has demonstrated that educators' clear, consistent AI guidelines are crucial for ensuring students understand how to utilize AI tools ethically and effectively (Chan & Hu, 2023; Črček & Patekar, 2023; Lingard, 2023; Shahzad et al., 2024). Tutors worked to bridge the gap between student and faculty expectations, a strategy supported by Cotton et al. (2024), who argue that writing centers must function as mediators in AI-related academic integrity concerns. By providing students with strategies for ethical AI integration that align with faculty guidelines, tutors ensured that students could confidently use AI tools without breaching academic integrity policies.

IMPLICATIONS

As AI becomes more common in student writing, writing centers must adopt strategies that maximize its benefits while maintaining academic integrity, engagement, and critical thinking. The following recommendations may guide tutors and administrators in supporting responsible AI use to ensure meaningful learning, address ethical challenges, and adhere to a balanced approach that adapts to technological shifts.

- **Encouraging open disclosure:** Drawing on the peer-based nature of their relationships with their students, peer tutors can engage students in a friendly, non-confrontational discussion about their use of AI in writing. By asking open-ended questions, peer tutors create a welcoming space where students feel comfortable discussing their motivations and thoughts on AI.
- **Understanding student motivations:** Peer tutors can engage their tutees in discussions about why they use AI. By gaining insight into students' perspectives, tutors can customize their feedback more effectively and help students make more intentional choices about AI use.
- **Discussing AI's benefits and limitations:** Peer tutors can engage students in open discussions about AI's advantages and shortcomings. This approach educates students on how AI can assist with lower-order concerns while emphasizing that it cannot replace higher-order skills like critical thinking and personal voice.
- **Emphasizing student potential:** Peer tutors can promote confidence in their students' voices by emphasizing that their creativity and insights create the most meaningful writing.
- **Encouraging learning over dependence:** Peer tutors can discuss the importance of developing critical thinking and writing skills with their tutees. Tutees can promote independent learning by encouraging students to use AI as a tool rather than a substitute.
- **Revising and rewriting AI-generated texts:** Peer tutors can guide students through revising AI-generated drafts and encourage them to revise their work to include their voice and ideas. This approach ensures that while AI can help with drafting, the final work remains authentic and aligned with the student's individual expression.
- **Promoting the ethical use of AI tools:** Peer tutors can reinforce academic integrity by guiding their students on the ethical use of AI tools. They can explain that while tools like ChatGPT can support writing, they are not appropriate for generating entire essays or substituting for original thinking.
- **Addressing inconsistencies in guidelines:** Peer tutors can ask their tutees about professor-specific policies regarding AI use and adhere to them. Writing center directors can also ask for more precise, standardized institutional guidelines. Clearer policies will reduce confusion and create consistency across courses.

CONCLUSION

This study offers insights into the challenges writing centers peer tutors face with the increasing presence of AI tools like ChatGPT in student writing, along with strategies they use to address these issues. Peer tutors noted ethical concerns when students used AI covertly, expressed discomfort with requests to "humanize" AI-generated work, and navigated the difficulties posed by inconsistent university guidelines on AI. In response

to these challenges, peer tutors adopted various strategies: They encouraged open disclosure, which prompted students to discuss their AI use openly and create transparency and trust in tutoring sessions. Peer tutors also took time to understand students' motivations for using AI, which allowed them to offer more personalized guidance. They emphasized the benefits and limitations of AI and stressed that while it may assist in brainstorming or organization, it should not replace independent and critical thinking. Additionally, peer tutors worked with students to revise AI-generated text, helping them reshape it to reflect their unique voice. They also reinforced the importance of academic integrity by explaining ethical AI use and encouraging students to align with faculty guidelines, which varied widely across courses.

Limitations

This study has limitations, including focusing on a single institution, reliance on qualitative data, and potential biases in focus group dynamics. Future research could expand to other institutions and employ longitudinal studies to track changes in AI writing over time. Research such as this could help develop comprehensive guidelines and ethical frameworks that preserve the writing center's traditional, student-centered approach. AI must remain a supplement to original writing, not a replacement for it so that it supports critical thinking. As writing centers adapt to technological shifts, they must promote independent, engaged, and critical writers.

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