

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: Valuing Learning through Untraditional Means

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This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a two year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, 2010.

Valuing Learning in the Composition Classroom

Though our educational system was patterned after those first established by the Greeks thousands of years ago in which a pillar of knowledge instructed a class of ignorant, our contemporary model has attempted to shift to a more interdependent view of knowledge-sharing than in times past. Kenneth Bruffee identifies this issue in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*: “Collaborative learning makes the Kuhnian assumption that knowledge is a consensus: it is something people construct interdependently by talking together. Knowledge in that sense, Kuhn says, is ‘intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all’” (134). Bruffee’s suggests we need a paradigm shift in our pedagogy if we are to change how we value learning.

As a pedagogical technique, collaborative learning seeks to place the responsibility of learning squarely upon the shoulders of the student with the teacher acting less like a pillar of truth, and more like a facilitator of learnable knowledge. Bruffee continues by introducing a political philosopher whose theories formed the basis upon which Bruffee defines knowledge:

Michael Oakeshott places this notion of knowledge as a community-owned social construct in an even broader context: our ability to participate in unending conversation distinguishes human beings from other animals. ‘As civilized human beings,’ Oakeshott says, ‘We are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of

an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves.... And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.’ (134)

Therefore, students, teachers, and writers in general enter into this conversation daily as they share knowledge with each other and engage communally. If this is truly the way knowledge is shared and society exists, then helping students work collaboratively on academic projects will help them more effectively engage in this conversation.

Collaborative learning’s primary goal is positive interdependence—the ability to become a sharer of knowledge rather than a mere consumer. In their article “Student Involvement in Learning: Cooperative Learning and College Instruction,” Jim Cooper and Randall Mueck write, “Perhaps the most characteristic feature of cooperative learning is positive interdependence; that is, all members of a learning team are responsible for the learning of other members” (68). Everyone learns together, including the instructor, as well as, obviously, the students involved. Bruffee writes, “There is no more important skill to learn in acquiring the craft of interdependence than learning to write effectively” (54). Concerning the examination of one’s own writing, Bruffee writes, “That is why writing can sometimes feel as awkward, and on occasion turn out as badly, as cutting your own hair while looking in a mirror. The complex decisions we have to make when we write are complicated even further by the fact that we write to suit the goals, interests, and knowledge of as many as three communities of readers” (58). These three communities are our own intertwining mix of relations in which we already maintain

membership, the community (or multiple) we wish to join, and the community of English speakers in general. It is this last community that teachers of writing ought to concern ourselves.

Students enrolled in English composition courses will learn from their instructors the art of rhetoric; that is a given. They are engaged in a community of students, with their friends, with their clubs and social groups, and with the university in general. In his chapter concerning writing and collaboration Bruffee teaches,

Thinking of writing as social, collaborative, and constructive tells us a good deal about how college and university teachers (and textbooks) should be teaching writing and expecting students to learn it. One implication is that, as much as they might like to, college and university teachers (and textbook writers) cannot *tell* students how to write. Instead, because writing is itself a displaced form of conversation, teachers have to find ways for students to learn to engage in constructive conversation with one another about writing. (58)

If writing is a way to enter the conversation, and a conversation often involves more than one person, then involving more than one student in the writing process seems a logical step to endure.

Peer Tutoring

The method for accomplishing this feat, the students' collaborative learning, is related to what Bruffee refers to as "peer review." By his accounts, conversations conducted with our peers are the "most productive kind of conversation. So students have to converse with their peers about writing both directly and indirectly. They have to talk with one another face-to-face about writing. They have to write to one another about writing" (59). This method of writing—two or more people working together to create a written document—is what the authors of the

textbook *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* refer to as “Collaborative Writing.”

Working together can help students to learn and perform the stages of writing more effectively. Additionally, students typically write better and take more pride in their writing when they are writing for an audience Finally, since many professions require collaborative writing, this technique can help prepare students for tasks they will have in their careers. (256)

In many career fields collaborative writing is a given and yet in many composition classrooms, collaborative writing is omitted.

Collaborative writing is not simply working together on the same project, but also one student assisting another with their drafts, which we’ll call “peer tutoring.” Bruffee emphasizes that “the educational effects of peer tutoring ... depend on the degree to which tutors and their tutees are real peers” (95). In order to empower students to help their classmates, we must help them to see that all “students involved—peer tutor and tutee alike—believe that they both bring an important measure of ability, expertise, and information to the encounter and, second, that all the students involved believe that, as students, they are unequivocally institutional status-equals” (95). Whether a student is a good writer or not, they need to learn that they serve as a reader who will see issues with the paper of which the author may be oblivious simply because they provide a different set of eyes. This benefit is not simply for the one being help, but even more so for the one giving the help.

As students review each other’s papers, they will likely encounter what Bruffee says every tutor endures during his tenure: “They develop writer’s awareness as readers by developing their sense of form. Because writers are always their own first readers, the better

readers they are, the better writers they are likely to become” (Bruffee 62). Through the collaborative process, students learn about organization, form, and style by providing feedback regarding these very things for the essays they read. As the feedback is received by their classmates, the corrections made, and the revised version submitted, the tutors will feel a sense of pride knowing that they’ve not only helped to create a better essay (both grammatically and contextually), but have become better writers themselves.

Untraditional Model

In their chapter “What is Collaborative Learning?” Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T. MacGregor provide evidence regarding the positive influence peer writing affords:

Getting and giving feedback helps students understand that writing is a social process, not a solo performance Peer writing also makes better writers. A major research study from the University of Chicago compared results of all the major approaches in teaching composition. It concluded that ‘having students work independently in small groups on purposefully designed and sequenced tasks produces significantly better results, as measured by the quality of thinking revealed in the writing, than does the current lecture method, whole class discussion methods, or open-ended group work.’ (16)

Another study conducted by Alexander Astin in 1993 concluded that “research has consistently shown that cooperative learning approaches produce outcomes that are superior to those obtained through traditional competitive approaches, and it may well be that our findings concerning the power of the peer group offer a possible explanation: Cooperative learning may be more potent than traditional methods of pedagogy because it motivates students to become more active and more involved participants in the learning process” (427). Though Bruffee admits that research

concerning university and college's use of collaborative learning practices "remains inadequate" (264), there is still ample enough proof that collaborative learning has its merits.

As Seneca writes *docendo discimus*—"by teaching we are learning" (*Epistulae Morales* I, 7, 8)—so also should we expect students to learn by helping their peers. In "Preparing Teachers and Students for Cooperative Work: Building Communication and Helping Skills," Sydney Farivar and Noreen Webb write, "From a theoretical perspective, both the help-giver and the help-receiver may benefit from elaborated help much more than from non-elaborated help. Giving explanations encourages the explainer to clarify, restructure, and reorganize the material in new ways to make it understandable to others, which in turn helps the explainer to understand it better" (170). By explaining to their fellow students what is necessary to make their essays more understandable to their audience, students will, in turn, more readily comprehend this process for their own writing. Bruffee adds, "Tutoring and its classroom counterpart, the organized, collaborative process of peer review, led in a single semester to dramatic improvement in the writing of some of the tutors, according to almost any measure: organization, style, perspicacity, balance, depth of understanding, tact. The tutors' willingness to read one another's writing and their ability to make constructive suggestions about it improved dramatically as well" (102). If the goal of collaborative learning is to enhance the skills of everyone involved by getting the writers more intensively engaged in the activity, then why hasn't it usurped the traditional pedagogy? Bruffee includes another "happy by-product," "Tutors understood, in some cases for the first time, some basic aspects of thought and conceptualization Their own work improved because, as a result of identifying these problems in the work of their tutees and their fellow tutors, they began to identify and resolve them in their own thought and writing. As one put it, the academic problems he confronted as a

peer tutor ‘seemed to be a mirror image of my own’” (104). In short, the students will improve their own writing by helping others to improve theirs. But if that was the end goal, then the traditions may more readily change.

The third likely positive effect of collaboration in the classroom on the students’ understanding of and ability to write is how it will transform the dynamic of the university itself. Concerning peer tutoring, Bruffee writes that “peer tutors can improve the overall quality of the undergraduate student body by fostering interdependence—social and intellectual maturity—in college and university students” (110). The goal of Bruffee’s book is not simply to change the students teachers will encounter or to improve upon a pedagogy perfect in its practice. Instead, Bruffee is hoping to revolutionize the face of education as we know it by creating programs more student-centered than teacher-centered. “Peer tutoring can quite simply make students more interesting to teach. Specifically, peer tutors can help colleges and universities bring about changes of four kinds: changes in human relations among students, among professors, and between students and professors; changes in classroom practice; changes in curriculum; and even (often the last domino to fall) changes in the prevailing understanding of the nature and authority of knowledge and the authority of teachers” (110). By engaging students in the process of collaborative writing, we help them learn to challenge the status quo by working together to achieve what could not be attained alone. In an education system built upon individual merit and competitive rankings, this sort of pedagogy could erode years of education.

To change would be difficult because as Cooper points out, “most college professors have received little or no instruction in pedagogy. As a result, they tend to teach students the way they were taught, using lecture and lecture-discussion methods.” (Cooper 74). The temptation will be to leave things as they’ve always been and let students learn about writing the

way they have for centuries. But can we so easily dismiss the benefits? Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T. MacGregor warn us that “collaborative learning represents a radical departure from contemporary practices in postsecondary education” (9). It’s not the norm to allow students to take center stage, but if they are allowed to do so, then they will never be the same. Smith and MacGregor explain,

Collaborative learning holds enormous promise for improving student learning and revitalizing college teaching. It is a flexible and adaptable approach appropriate to any discipline. Nonetheless, teachers who adopt collaborative learning approaches find it challenging. They inevitably face fundamental questions about the purposes of their classes, teacher and student roles and responsibilities, the relationship between educational form and content, and the nature of knowledge itself. (9)

Implementing collaborative learning practices will make better students, improve our professorial staff, and ultimately provide a great service to the entire community.

Recommendations

- Most instructors view collaborative learning as merely “peer review” and practice it by allowing one student to judiciously comment on another’s draft rather than provide a reading as a reader. Instructors and students both ought to be trained in the practice of “peer tutoring” through this revised format.
- Since peer tutoring focuses more on the learning the tutor gets than on the lessons he gives, instructors will need to allow for in-class time to train the tutors and assign as homework the process of reviewing others’ papers.
- Working on synthesized papers between two or more individuals creates some different adversities than the traditional individualistic methodologies, but can lead to diverse learning and greater benefits to the collaborative process.
- Challenging the faculty to allow students to have more control over the learning experience through collaboration can be an impossible task without colleagues to champion the effort.

References

Astin, Alexander. *What Matters in College?: Four Critical Years Revisited*. San

Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Barkley, Elizabeth F., and Claire Howell Major. *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.

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Cooper, J. & Mueck, R. (1992). Student Involvement in Learning: Cooperative Learning and College Instruction. In A.S. Goodsell (Ed.), *Collaborative Learning: A Sourcebook for Higher Education* (pp. 70-74). University Park, PA: NCTLA.

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MacCurdy, Marian M., and Charles M. Anderson. *Writing and Healing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2000.

Smith, Barbara Leigh, and Jean MacGregor. "What is Collaborative Learning." *Collaborative Learning*. Ed. Anne S. Goodsell. University Park, PA: NCTLA, 1992. 9-22.

Annotated Readings

Coles, Robert. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Trade and Reference, 1989.

This book is an exploration on learning through teaching, and about how one can understand the world around them through the stories that they live and tell. Though not specifically about

collaborative learning, Cole's discusses how teachers in and out of the medical field can learn from those they are instructing and those they patients placed in their care.

Dodge, Lucy and Martha E. Kendall. "Learning Communities." *College Teaching*.

Vol. 52, No. 4 (Fall, 2004), pp. 150-155

This article describes several types of "learning communities" (writing-centric groups that cross disciplines) and explains the benefits to both students and faculty. Fostering workforce skills, encouraging problem-solving skills, and increasing retention and success are some of the benefits for students and faculty. In addition, faculty members gain new teaching skills and energize their teaching and learning. Guidelines are provided to assist in implementing learning communities.

Hancock, Dawson. "Cooperative Learning and Peer Orientation Effects on Motivation and

Achievement." *The Journal of Educational Research*. Vol. 97, No. 3 (Jan-Feb 2004), pp. 159-166).

A study based on graduate students' motivation for peer collaboration and the subsequent effects of forced cooperation. Those with a high tolerance for collaboration grew in their appreciation for its effectiveness while those not so inclined maintained their preferences.

Kram, Kathy E. and Lynn A. Isabella. "Mentoring Alternatives: The Role of Peer Relationships

in Career Development." *The Academy of Management Journal*. Vol. 28, No. 1 (mar 1985), pp. 110-132.

This article examines the value of “peer relationships” over traditional mentoring models and shows the unique manner in which these relationships can support psychosocial interactions. The role of peer mentoring serves to enhance the role of experienced mentors in more traditional methods in ways more productive, both socially and professionally, than their counterparts.

Nilson, Linda B. “Improving Student Peer Feedback.” *College Teaching*. Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter, 2003), pp. 34-38.

This article examines the typical judgment-based feedback questions given to students by their instructors as they prepare to conduct peer review of each other’s writing assignments. It then posits an alternative that encourages genuine feedback based upon a reader’s honest interpretation of the materials presented.

Roscoe, Rod D. and Michelene T H Chi. “Understanding Tutor Learning: Knowledge-Building and Knowledge-Telling in Peer Tutor’s Explanations and Questions.” *Review of Educational Research*. Vol. 77, Iss. 4 (Dec., 2007), pp. 534-75.

This article examines how tutor learning has been observed across diverse settings, yet the magnitude of gains from this process is often underwhelming. In this review, “the authors consider how analyses of tutors’ actual behaviors may help to account for variation in learning outcomes and how typical tutoring behaviors may create or undermine opportunities for learning.” They emphasize the point that “peer tutors, even when trained, focus more on delivering knowledge rather than developing it. As a result, the true potential for tutor learning may rarely be achieved.” The review concludes by offering recommendations for how future

research can utilize tutoring process data to understand how tutors learn and perhaps develop new training methods.

Trentin, Guglielmo. "Networked Collaborative Learning in the Study of Modern History and Literature." *Computers and the Humanities*. Vol. 38, No. 3 (Aug., 2004), pp. 299-315.

Collaboration is much easier in this computer age, but sometimes learning the intricacies of the age is can be more challenging than the act of collaboration itself. This article offers a series of thoughts triggered by observation of the results and the dynamics generated by this networked approached to collaboration.

Tudge, Jonathan. "Theory, Method, and Analysis in Research on the Relations between Peer Collaboration and Cognitive Development." *The Journal of Experimental Education*. Vol. 69, No. 1 (Fall, 2000), pp. 98-112.

This article analyzed other articles in the same journal based upon their proper use of theory regarding their understanding and application of peer collaboration and cognitive development. In evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, the author is able to provide insights into the proper study, understanding, and application of the subject.

Van Meter, Peggy and Robert J. Stevens. "The Role of Theory in the Study of Peer Collaboration." *The Journal of Experimental Education*. Vol. 69, No. 1 (Fall, 2000), pp. 113-127.

This article illustrates how research on peer collaboration is influenced by different theoretical perspectives. The authors use connections among theory, research questions, and study methods

to identify how theory affected the work of each group of researchers. They then make the case that the real need lies in the integration of those theories and in the integration of all findings relevant to applied questions of collaborative processing.