Collaborative Learning and Writing Across the Curriculum

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In the last decade, WPAs on campuses of all sizes and traditions have become ambassadors to diverse academic departments in an attempt to promote a comprehensive approach to writing. Even at institutions in which writing across the curriculum has not really taken hold, it is no longer respectable to consider the writing center or the composition program as a campus ghetto, where distasteful problems may be relegated. Many of us who became WPAs in 1975 or earlier remember other days, when faculty members could, unchallenged, vent their righteous indignation over "the writing problem" and point the finger of blame at young, hapless WPAs, whose tenure depended upon being cheerful flak catchers, while accumulating publications on Piers Plowman. If such attitudes still exist, on most campuses they have at least gone underground. East, west, north, and south, deans, and even some English department chairpersons, now chant the phrase, "writing across the curriculum." It is my view that wherever writing across the curriculum is more than a catch phrase, collaborative learning plays a part.

Kenneth A. Bruffee, as both the chief philosopher and practitioner of collaborative learning in American education, has taken the idea out of the category of classroom methodology into a realm where pedagogy and epistemology meet. Bruffee has articulated a social constructionist way of talking about writing and about learning in general. Briefly, Bruffee claims that members of a community create knowledge and, indeed, formulate themselves as a community through conversation. This conversation—articulation and exchange by means of a system of symbols—constitutes meaning and indeed knowledge itself. Teaching is then defined as a process of socialization and orientation for newcomers into the conversation of the culture. Learning, according to Bruffee, is definitively active and interactive. The phrase, "passive student," is an oxymoron, since an individual cannot at the same time be both uninvolved and learning. The teacher is then not an actor who performs as students watch, but is instead a director who creates "conditions in which learning can occur" (Bruffee 8).

Collaborative learning, as Bruffee uses the term, is constitutive of writing across the curriculum, if we define writing as a process of making choices, in other words, as a process of critical thinking. Writing is complex because it involves a metalanguage: "Using language to make decisions about language complicates the problem because in order to

think about the subject we are judging (the next word to use, its proper form, or how to begin the next paragraph) we also have to think about how our minds are working, how we are using language to make that judgment. This process can feel as awkward as trying to cut our own hair while looking in a mirror." (Bruffee 6) When we write, we have to step outside ourselves. Getting outside ourselves remains an abstraction unless we can actually engage in conversation with individuals at approximately our own stage of development. Programs of writing across the curriculum, as opposed to those of grammar across the curriculum, create settings in which students learn how to nurture each other's ideas, how to share drafts of works in progress, and how to evaluate each other's public statements. Writing across the curriculum then becomes a means for transforming the college into what James Kinneavy calls a "collegium, a unified body of academics, speaking the same language about the problems of various disciplines" (20).

As WPAs, we can transform the current enthusiasm for writing across the curriculum into an opportunity to create a collegium. Such a transformation depends on collaborative learning in a number of different forms:

(1) collaborative learning among faculty members;

(2) collaborative learning as a classroom procedure to help instructors in all disciplines to handle the paper load;

(3) collaborative learning as a way to help students to internalize the concept of audience;

(4) collaborative learning as a way of creating a community through acknowledgment;

(5) collaborative learning as a means for creating partnerships between colleges and school districts.

Collaborative learning among faculty members

Conversation about writing is a prerequisite for a program of writing across the curriculum. In other words, curricular change depends on scholarly exchange. The first job of the WPA is to find appropriate means for promoting this conversation. On many campuses the writing workshop has provided the privileged space necessary for focussed discussion about definitions of writing and about connections between writing and thinking. These workshops can take various forms. Some workshop leaders emphasize expressive writing so that faculty members in various disciplines can become conscious of the epistemic power of the written word. Other workshop leaders (myself among them) prefer beginning

with faculty response to student work-in-progress. When scholars in a variety of disciplines all study the same academic paper, the text becomes a prism refracting fundamental issues in education.

On many campuses, faculty participants regard the writing workshop as a means for intellectual renewal and as a forum for reaffirming a commitment to liberal learning. Even if the workshop lasts only a day, faculty members find within it a reminder of why they entered higher education in the first place. Most academics choose their careers because they enjoy intellectual conversation with their peers, the kind of conversation that keeps people in graduate school. Typically, academic institutions provide opportunities for exchange only in committee meetings or at parties. The writing workshop is not designed to conduct the business of the institution, nor is it intended for frivolous interactions. The workshop provides a format for an intellectual sharing that is good in itself and that can also be the foundation for institutional development.

At large research universities, the joys and benefits of the faculty writing workshop often remain undiscovered. The habit of intellectual isolation is difficult to break at places where scholarly loneliness is so well rewarded. Some universities, especially those with a particular commitment to undergraduate education, e.g. Stanford, have managed to entice senior scholars to attend workshops. But direct collaborative learning among faculty members is more likely to be found at liberal arts colleges.

Some universities have discovered effective indirect means to promote conversations about writing. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, conducts workshops for graduate students, who then cooperate with senior professors to offer writing enrichment courses. Brown University provides undergraduate rhetoric assistants to professors who agree to incorporate writing into the learning process. Through this systematic collaboration with specially prepared students, professors create courses that teach writing as a process of thinking and of intellectual exchange.

Collaborative learning as a classroom procedure to help instructors in all disciplines to handle the paper load

Faculty members initially volunteer to attend writing workshops or to offer writing enrichment courses (with the aid of graduate or undergraduate assistants) because they are sincerely committed to improving the quality of students' public statements. Even when instructors become well convinced of the epistemic significance of writing, most still believe that student writers cannot be concerned exclusively with private writing and that teachers have an obligation to provide readers for much student work. Such guilt-ridden (or responsible) beliefs will insure that writing across the curriculum will be shortlived, unless faculty members learn strategies for handling the paper load. Remarkably, classroom

techniques for collaborative learning, besides being philosophically justifiable, are also highly pragmatic. If the instructor expands the readership for students' writing and eschews the lonely martyrdom of being the sole respondent to student work, then writing across the curriculum becomes possible in the short run and viable in the long run.

In *A Short Course in Writing* Bruffee provides useful and explicit suggestions for managing collaborative learning. Besides adapting his suggestions to my own purposes in teaching, my colleagues and I at Beaver College have developed our own procedure for peer criticism, a procedure that depends heavily on reciprocity. Under our system, the writer of the paper provides a self-analysis of a draft before a peer reviewer considers it. In the self-analysis, the writer responds at least to the following questions: (a) How close to being finished is the draft? (b) What steps do you plan to take to complete the project? (c) How can readers best help you at this stage? This commentary provides context for the peer reader, who then addresses at least the following matters: (a) What do you think is the main idea? (b) Please respond to the writer's specific requests for help.

This procedure sets up a reciprocity that allows for productive conversation. The writers are in the position of actually asking for advice before suggestions are thrust upon them. Student writers may also be more inclined to reject advice, without rejecting the peer adviser. Probably the most difficult part of peer review is to learn to listen actively to classmates' commentary without always agreeing to act on their suggestions. The objectivity gained from listening to others will improve the paper, even when specific advice may not itself be fruitful.

While students are reading each other's papers and writing their self-analyses and peer reviews, the instructor is free to use class time to conduct individual conferences on drafts. If students are taught the procedures of peer review in a composition program, then instructors outside the English department can assign self-analysis and peer review as homework activities, thereby conserving precious class time. Best of all, instructors create opportunities for frequent feedback on student work, but most of the responses come from the students themselves. If three or four students exchange drafts, then writers will have the task of reconciling sometimes conflicting advice, a frequent situation in the world outside the classroom. Students may then seek the instructor's help in interpreting peer responses, rather than passively expecting the instructor to supply the formula for the perfect paper.

Collaborative learning as a way to help students to internalize the concept of audience

Besides helping instructors to handle the paper load, collaborative learning gives students concrete experience to help them imagine the abstraction of audience. No matter how many times we tell them otherwise, most students assume that the instructor is the audience for all assigned work. Students may have a difficult time believing in the necessity to fictionalize an audience because in actuality the teacher will read the papers and assign the grades. Students cannot readily see why, for all practical purposes, they should have to think beyond pleasing this magisterial reader. Even when we explain the necessity of imagining a reader who knows less about the subject than the instructor is presumed to know, students often interpret that advice as idiosyncratic to the teacher who offers it.

When students do not sufficiently imagine an appropriate audience for academic work, their papers will either say too much—summarizing the plot of a novel before analyzing it—or too little—referring to information and even to class discussions familiar to the teacher reading the paper. Such papers provide little sense of context or purpose for the reader. At worst, they sound like messages from outer space, suddenly appearing within one's ken, without offering a sense of purpose or a way to define oneself within the text. When a writer inadequately defines audience, the reader is homeless within the text, wandering aimlessly from sentence to sentence.

Even experienced writers will sometimes inadvertently orphan their readers in this way. Student writers need special help. The best way for any writer—experienced or inexperienced—to give readers a sense of presence in the text is to make them literally present by asking people to read work-in-progress. For students who in Piagetian terms may be in the process of moving from the stage of concrete thinking to formal operations (thinking in abstractions), sharing drafts of written work may be the most effective way to understand the intangible through experience with the actual.

Collaborative learning as a way of creating a community through acknowledgment

Educating students in responsible ways to read each other's work-in-progress makes writing across the curriculum possible by reducing the paper load for the instructor while at the same time expanding the concept of audience for the student. Learning to cooperate in ways that are neither exploitative nor intrusive is one of the most important challenges in education. Most professionally published texts contain pages of acknowledgment: documents attesting to the author's commitment to collaborative learning. When students read these acknowledgments, they will see actual examples of intellectual generosity and gratitude. If, after reading these published models, students are asked to write their own acknowledgments, they may learn to demonstrate intellectual

responsibility instead of mere avoidance of plagiarism. More than learning to assign appropriate credit for help received, students will also experience the interdependence of knowledge.

Students' acknowledgments become intellectual histories of the papers that they write. As students read and write acknowledgments, they participate directly in a community of writers. In fact, they become in their own way makers of their own communities, as they acknowledge their cooperation with others in the making of meaning. When writers in any discipline and in any stage of development acknowledge others' work, they connect their own statements to a continuum of discourse, to an ongoing conversation. Becoming part of that conversation is the major goal of both collaborative learning and writing across the curriculum.

Collaborative learning as a means for creating partnerships between colleges and school districts

Collaborative learning and writing across the curriculum are helping to recreate our colleges and universities into communities of scholars. These concepts can also remind us of our natural partnerships with educators in the schools. For the last decade the National Writing Project has fostered such cooperation. Other projects, like the ones at Beaver College, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, have organized regional teams of secondary and postsecondary teachers to work collaboratively to improve teaching in writing and in the humanities. National Academic Alliances, under the direction of Claire Gaudiani at the University of Pennsylvania, helps to organize local groups of high school and college teachers by field of study (foreign language, literature, history) to meet monthly to engage in intellectual exchange and renewal.

Collaborative learning as a means of faculty development, as a pedagogy, and as a rationale for better cooperation among levels of education counters the educational fragmentation that once forced WPAs to live in institutional ghettos. Kenneth Bruffee's career in the last decade has been devoted to helping the academy to make connections of all productive kinds. Let us not forget that this journal and the National Council of Writing Program Administrators have their origins in Bruffee's commitment to cooperation. As the first chairman of the MLA Teaching of Writing Division, Bruffee called a meeting of writing program administrators at the MLA meeting in New York in December 1976. Spontaneous exchanges on that occasion led to the formation of WPA. A decade ago, when many of us were working in isolation from colleagues on our campuses and from each other, Bruffee gave us an opportunity to collaborate, to learn to make judgments together, and, most important, to form a community.

Works Cited

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