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Turning writing instruction on its head: Building collaborative composition skills from the bottom up

Almost every high school teacher or university professor has heard a similar complaint during his or her instructional career: *"I don't want to work with a group on this project. I prefer to work alone."* It is difficult not to be sympathetic. As professionals, we often strive to respect a variety of learning styles and do what we can to ensure that students succeed in their educational endeavors. Indeed, that is the generally accepted reason for utilizing the collaborative learning model.

In the article "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind," Kenneth Bruffee highlights some successful applications of this strategy. He points specifically to work by M.L.J. Abercrombie and her ten years of research on the selection and training of medical students. Abercrombie found that groups of medical students working together to collaboratively diagnose a patient mastered the "art" of medical judgment better and faster than students working alone. (Bruffee 395)

Although more college professors have begun to utilize collaborative assignments in the university setting, the fact remains that high school teachers use this strategy much less — and middle school teachers do so rarely, if ever. Unfortunately, this limited use of collaborative learning and writing strategies in the upper grades of high school — and even the increased utilization in the university setting — may be too little, too late.

When we consider the situation in this context, it becomes even easier to understand the root of that common complaint against "group work." Realistically, we might as well ask our students to submit their writing assignments in an obscure foreign language. In essence, collaboration is "all Greek" to them. They have neither the experience nor the desire to effectively engage in a "group" writing process. As an educational system, we have conditioned students to "sink or swim" on their own only to switch strategies on the eve of their high school graduation and/or introduction to the university setting.

In an effort to more effectively motivate and equip writing students, teachers must provide collaborative writing experiences that not only allow students to cooperatively generate knowledge relevant to themselves but also assignments that prepare these students for the task of navigating various knowledge communities. And these efforts must not be limited to upper-level composition courses in the high school or introduced to students at the university level. These collaborative strategies must be the foundation for teaching our children not only how to write, but also how to think.

Mastery of language allows for the creation of knowledge. Quite simply, the ability to communicate allows us to think and to abstract. Bruffee explains, "The view that conversation and thought are causally related assumes not that thought is an essential attribute of the human mind but that it is instead an artifact created by social interaction. We can think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk." (398) Indeed, as the Isocratean concept of logos proposes, "word" and "thought" are united. But traditional schooling treats the composition process at early levels as a solitary activity — a task to be mastered by the individual. Somehow, writing becomes divorced

from other aspects of "communications" training. We teach children language acquisition skills so that they might communicate with their peers, their teachers and society at large. In short, we perpetuate a method of communication because want children to be social and teachable.

But when it comes to writing, we abandon that social connection. Brufee contends that writing is merely "a technologically displaced form of conversation." (400) Yet, we seem to insist in secondary composition classrooms that this "written conversation" be internal and one-sided. In her analysis of the "basic writer," Andrea Lunsford offers a telling quote from Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*: "What a child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions." (280). Waiting until the college level to acclimate writers to a collaborative process takes an established pattern of thought and attempts to change it as opposed to nurturing the desired thought process from the beginning. As an educational system, we have programmed students to be solitary composers and then require that they adopt a new way of thinking — one that has become foreign, unfamiliar, and, in many cases, uncomfortable.

But multi-party conversation is critical to our development and existence — as students, as writers and as human beings. In support of this stance, Bruffee cites Michael Oakeshott who argues,

> As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation.... It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of our selves.... Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, distinguish the proper occasions

> of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance. (397)

And because, as a rule, we are not hermits, we must converse and interact with others. Without this sharing of opinions, we run the risk of letting our internal limitations govern our thoughts. Our bias or narrow-mindedness can begin to shape our thinking. (398) However, by allowing discourse to take place and by promoting collaborative writing, students become empowered to critically examine their learning. They can choose to accept it as legitimate or reject it as inapplicable and unnecessarily canonized. By allowing multiple voices to be heard and encouraging many pens to be used in framing the conclusions of those discussions, we provide the opportunity for a more rich exploration of an issue — a process where each student has an equal stake in the outcome.

Although foundational writing skills must be mastered by each student, our composition must move beyond our individuality and engage our peers if it is to be truly relevant and contribute to the knowledge community for which it is intended. The first benefit of this approach is that students become active participants in constructing their own knowledge. If, as educators, we choose to play the role of Mina Shaughnessy's tower guards and dole out the "approved" knowledge to children for later regurgitation, we risk disenfranchising them and subjecting them to failure. (290) Middle- and high-school students often disconnect when forced to learn something "other people" deem important. Rather than striving for an ethereal Platonic ideal that many contemporary students see as both irrelevant and unattainable, the learners serve as their own knowledge community. The result of their "normal discourse" is a statement that can

generally be agreed upon as true by all participants in the discussion. (Bruffee 401) In essence, they establish doxa. And by discussing topics as a group and writing collaboratively, they not only become more invested in the process of learning but also avoid the early Sophistic pitfall of seeing all outcomes as equally viable and acceptable. Rather than accepting a complete lack of Truth, students begin to understand that they must function within the confines of their peer society. In essence, this model also emulates the ideals of a third Sophistic movement. James Berlin maintains in his essay "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories" that, in terms of the New Rhetoric, knowledge is not static. Rather, he argues "truth is dynamic and dialectical, the result of a process involving the interaction of opposing elements." He adds, "Communication is always basic to the epistemology underlying the New Rhetoric because truth is always truth for someone standing in relation to others in a linguistically circumscribed situation." (242)

From this framework, students can help each other increase their own capacity and move on to more challenging and complex knowledge communities. According to Bruffee:

> No child is wholly ignorant and inexperienced. Every student is already a member of several knowledge communities, from canoeing to computers, baseball to ballet. Membership in any one of these communities may not be a resource that will by itself help much directly in learning to organize an essay or explicate a poem. But pooling the resources that a group of peers brings with them to the task may make accessible the normal discourse of the new community they together hope to enter. (403)

Bruffee further explains that the collaborative approach has already been successfully applied to the writing process at the university level demonstrating that students are indeed capable of mutual support and learning.

> Students' work tended to improve when they got help from peers; peers offering help, furthermore, learned from the student they helped and from the activity of helping itself. Collaborative learning, it seemed, harnessed the powerful educative force of peer influence that had been — and largely still is — ignored and hence wasted by traditional forms of education. (396)

The success of this approach is not surprising when viewed through a Burkean lens. Collaborative learning may very well succeed because students share a consubstantiality that a teacher often has difficulty establishing. Because members of the group are all students, they can quickly identify with each other. A teacher, on the other hand must overcome a host of potential differences such as age, background, ethnicity and status.

In this context, the instructor does not function as a gatekeeper standing guard before the holy horde of writing excellence. Similarly, the teacher cannot pose as the enlightened philosopher sharing brief glimpses of the "ideal" writing method. Rather, writing teachers must follow Shaughnessy's advice to "dive in" with the students and learn more about themselves and their students' abilities. Shaughnessy counsels that "the experience of studenthood is the experience of being just so far over one's head that it is both realistic and essential to work at surviving." (295) The experience of teacherhood therefore must be careful guidance of students into progressively deeper waters at developmentally appropriate times. The teacher must act as a facilitator helping students to overcome the occasional difficulties that arise during social interaction. Teachers must also be flexible enough to provide key pieces of information that might be missing from the group's collective experience and thus preventing them from gaining entrance to a particular knowledge community while also being willing to withhold that information if the group has the capacity to reach the conclusion on its own.

The second benefit to equipping students with the ability to write collaboratively is that it more fully prepares them for the workplace. In their book *Worlds Apart*, Patrick Dias et al note that a "perennial chorus of complaints" arises from the business world claiming that graduating students are not fully prepared for workplace writing. (5) Utilizing collaborative strategies earlier in the development of skills could address this need. This is true largely because workplace writing is primarily a social or collaborative effort. (9)

The authors of this work argue that collaborative production of a piece of writing goes far beyond "division of labor" issues. "It is also that other people's contributions, not only via direct inputs and suggestions, but through their experience as stored in genres, existing texts, and cultural forms, are integral to the apparently individual production." (32) They add that,

> genres embody the experience of previous writers, allowing it to be reactivated on each new occasion of writing. This is stored knowledge even though the individual writers who use the genres would generally be unable to say what that knowledge is. The stored knowledge is inherent in the reiteration of the genre: textual regularities of form and category, habits of information collection and archival practices, patterns of writing and reading. (31)

For this reason, it is critical that composition teachers provide textual "voices" for students to consider in their group conversations of a particular issue and collaborative composition process. They must have access not only to the writing of "experts" but also to peer-generated texts and examples of their own previous writing.

The inclusion of peer-generated texts adds a layer of authenticity to the writing process. They can see legitimate participation in (or at least commentary on) some knowledge community by a writer similar to themselves. The inclusion of past writing

samples reinforces the need to revisit writing in the construction of new texts. Dias et al note that, on the university level,

> student papers are often thrown out immediately after the grade is assigned; occasionally they are not even picked up from the grader. Even when they are kept in the student's files, they are rarely consulted again by the writer and almost never by anyone else. In the workplace, however, texts have a continued physical existence (in accessible files within the institution) as well as an ongoing role in the institutional conversation and memory. (62)

In their comparison of workplace and academic writing the authors also noted a higher density and complexity of intertextuality in workplace documents. (37) They go so far as to argue that "workplace writing is characterized by a kind of intertextuality entirely absent from [University] writing; workplace writing is resonant with the discourse of colleagues and the ongoing conversation of the institution." (63)

If graduates are to successfully contribute to this environment, they must begin to appreciate the interrelation of texts at an earlier stage of development. High school students must move beyond the blanket requirement to cite sources and begin to appreciate the impact that past texts have on the shaping of current, or even future, constructions. While preventing outright plagiarism is important, teachers must also emphasize and encourage their students to see the intertextual influences at work.

As previously stated, utilizing a collaborative approach in writing empowers students to create their own doxa. This experience pays valuable dividends in the workplace. Just as knowledge or truth are subject to revision based on continued conversation within a knowledge community, genres utilized within communities of practice must also evolve and change.

> Such formal and structural elements are not seen as intrinsically fixed and immutable, rather they emerge and become salient in recurring rhetorical

> situations that justify their usefulness, and continue to evolve or decline in use. It follows that the knowledge necessary to produce effective texts within a setting is not a static entity but a fluid set of variables continually in the flux of textual and contextual demands. (8)

Indeed, "genres spring from a collective or social motive, and that motive is the manifestation of ideology: it is the beliefs, power relations, and aspirations of the community transformed into rhetorical action." (172) Graduates accustomed to this sort of social construction and negotiation will have a decided advantage over those workers who lack this experience. Rather than being disoriented because the immutable "ideal" has suddenly changed, these writers are able tap the doxa of the community of practice and continue to contribute.

Dias et al point out that the teacher-student relationship is vastly different from the relationship shared by fellow employees. In fact, the workplace dynamic is often much more collegial despite title differences. (150) Students who have engaged in collaborative writing processes will be much more accustomed to working with peers. Because they learned from and reinforced writing skills for each other, they can more smoothly step into the workplace environment and function as a productive member of a group. They will have been less conditioned to look to an authority figure for explicit direction.

Finally, composition teachers must encourage writers to work collaboratively throughout the entire process of constructing a text. Dias et al note that in the university setting much of the collaboration seemed to take place prior to the creation of a first draft. In contrast, workplace writing extensively employed intensive collaboration throughout the revision process as well. (196) They point out that these comments are collaborative in nature (a function of the peer relationship) as opposed to evaluative (a function of the

traditional teacher-student relationship). Their conclusion: "workplace newcomers need to learn to learn again." (196) This observation further underscores the need to develop collaborative composition skills from the beginning of a student's writing education — not at the end of his or her academic career.

Higher-level, effective writing should not be acquired late in a student's life. Sending a graduate into the workplace with minimal experience in collaboration does a grave disservice to both the former student and the employer. Rather, composition teachers should integrate the following principles in their writing instruction:

- Individual/solitary creation of a written work should be de-emphasized within composition courses throughout a student's academic career in favor of collaborative strategies. This is especially true of middle and high school writing instruction. These levels should focus primarily on collaborative writing strategies and utilization. Obviously it is necessary to evaluate a particular student's ability to compose. An individual writing assignment can be utilized to gauge this mastery, but could be the confined to a single paper. Additionally, this assignment should not be the overwhelming factor in determining the student's grade.
- "Expert" and peer-generated models of other texts should always be provided to students prior to discussion and creation of initial drafts. Students should also be encouraged to review their previous writing for connections to the current topic. This allows students to authenticate their participation and explore the intertextual influences at work.
- Collaborative techniques should be emphasized throughout the composition process and especially encouraged in the revision stages.

Bruffee states that “to think well as individuals, we must learn to think well collectively — that is we must learn to converse well.” (399) By extension, if students are to write well individually, they must start by collaborating on the creation of text with their peers. As Vygotsky’s writings point out, skills mastered externally are subsequently transferable for internal use. Given the positive results demonstrated by use of collaborative writing techniques in the university setting, it stands to reason that our students can achieve even more if this group framework is natural and transparent. By starting from the ground up, we can assist students in developing the appropriate cognitive habits early in their academic careers to facilitate this collaborative writing. We can prepare our students to see the necessity of participating with their peers and perhaps silence that common complaint about collaborative composition assignments.

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