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Collaboration and Ethics in Writing Center Pedagogy

Irene Lurkis Clark

The term *collaborative learning* has become well known only over the last fifteen years, but collaboration among academic colleagues has long been a part of university life. In the process of writing this paper, for example, I submitted an early draft to my colleague, Betty Bamberg, who recommended that I write a new introduction, suggested an important additional source, and even noted a few typos. I, myself, regularly review the early drafts of book chapters for another colleague, and, on a few occasions, I have even rewritten a few sentences for him. Friends of mine in the social sciences assist one another even more regularly, suggesting sources, trading drafts, rephrasing and deleting sentences, polishing style. When an article is published, the author may write a formal note acknowledging the assistance of a colleague. But few of us worry about the ethics of such assistance or about whether this type of collegial collaboration could be viewed as a form of plagiarism.

In writing labs and centers, though, the kind of assistance which occurs regularly among colleagues might raise questions, if not eyebrows, over issues of ethics. In the writing center, tutors are usually not encouraged to make stylistic revisions or write on a student paper; in fact, only a student is supposed to even hold the pen. Nor are tutors supposed to suggest specific additional sources for reference. "You might go to the library and find some additional sources," a tutor might venture. Or else, "Do you think this section might be expanded? In what way?" In the context of writing center pedagogy, a tutor would be cautioned against rephrasing a student's sentence, nor would a tutor be encouraged to pass along one of his own articles for a student to look at for additional ideas or sources. After all, to give a

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student something written by a tutor might encourage plagiarism, either deliberate or inadvertent; and, certainly, one of the prime concerns of writing centers is to avoid charges of plagiarism at all costs. Unfortunately, however, writing centers' concern with avoiding charges of plagiarism and with self-justification in general have generated policies, which, in some instances, may actually be counterproductive to student learning.

In this context, then, I would like to address the following questions:

Why are writing centers so concerned with issues of plagiarism?

How has concern with plagiarism influenced writing center pedagogy?

To what extent has this concern with plagiarism been counterproductive to student learning?

I first became aware of how suspiciously writing centers could be viewed by other departments when I gave a presentation in New Zealand several years ago. The purpose of my presentation was to explain how writing labs and centers functioned in the United States, and I approached my topic with great confidence and enthusiasm. However, I was surprised and dismayed to discover that several members of the faculty I was addressing were less than excited with my approach, feeling that any assistance a student received from a writing center tutor constituted a blatant form of plagiarism. "The students must love your center," one professor observed drily. "You do all of their work for them."

Of course, one might dismiss such an attitude as a misconception of the unenlightened. However, even a casual glance at writing center publications suggests that avoiding charges of plagiarism and justifying writing center pedagogy constitutes a prime concern for Writing Center directors, suggesting that such suspicions are more widespread than is generally recognized. Larry Rochelle's article, appearing in the September, 1981 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, observes the following:

We must keep in mind that some "enemies" of the Center are overwrought English professors, our own colleagues, who really do not like students or teaching, who are very demanding in their classrooms for all the wrong reasons, and who really think that Writing Centers are helping students too much. (7)

The use of the word *enemies* here suggests that Writing Centers must remain alert to an attack of some sort, a state of mind more suggestive of the military than the university. Another article by Patrick Sullivan, appearing in the May 1984 issue of the *Newsletter*, similarly observes that the close relationships which develop between tutors and students sometimes generate their own "special set of problems. The instructor may not be aware that a student has received help with a writing assignment. In this case, instructors may feel that matters related to the policy on plagiarism obtain" (2). In a

later *Writing Lab Newsletter* article (December 1985), Sullivan discusses the results of a survey of faculty reaction to their students' receiving assistance from a writing center. Although many were pleased, even enthusiastic, about this sort of assistance, a surprising number regarded it with great mistrust. "I don't approve of them editing final drafts," one respondent observed. Another indicated that he highly disapproved of writing center assistance, particularly "in cases where a student has serious grammatical and organizational problems. I would even prefer he or she not take a draft of the paper to the Center at all, but rather get help through the use of verb exercises" (6). Again, this statement may be dismissed as yet another aberrant opinion; nevertheless, such a position is more common than we would like to believe.

Why are writing center teachers and administrators so concerned with the issue of plagiarism, more concerned, I would venture to guess, than those who work in language or math labs? One possible explanation is that writing, as opposed to other disciplines, has always been viewed as a solitary rather than as a collaborative activity, and therefore collaboration in any form is regarded with mistrust. In a recent CCCC presentation concerned with ethics and the writing center, Karen Hodges discussed the wide diversity in attitude toward collaborative effort among various disciplines, concluding that English Departments, unlike departments in the natural and social sciences, were most concerned about the shaping of the text and thus were least likely to favor collaboration between student and professor.

Hodges maintained that because English departments tended to view content and form as interrelated, they were more suspicious of writing center pedagogy than departments in the sciences or social sciences. Sharing this perspective, Trimbur points out that the cultural history of writing suggests that writing a paper, as opposed to studying for an exam, has always been done on an individual basis. Referring to his own participation in study groups as an undergraduate, Trimbur states, "If Western Civilization was seen as a collective problem permitting a collective response, writing was apparently an individual problem, private and displaced from the informal network of mutual aid" (2). Similarly, Bruffee points out that "collaboration and community activity is inappropriate and foreign to work in humanistic disciplines, such as English. Humanistic study, we have been led to believe, is a solitary act" (645).

The humanities tradition dictates, then, that form and style, not simply content, are the essence of a text, and thus that writers, and in particular student writers, ought to work alone. The literature tells us of lonely poets and fiction writers inspired by muses at midnight; no one ever hears of a muse inspiring groups of two or three. Thus, any form of collaborative writing is open to suspicion, and writing centers, relatively new facilities

within the university, are particularly concerned with being above suspicion and establishing their worth in order to wrangle funds out of dubious administrators. Neulieb's article in the March 1980 issue of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* highlights this concern with self-justification: "Proving to the university in general and to those with the pursestrings in particular, that a writing facility has been effective and useful takes a plan of action that includes several different thrusts" (2). Neulieb continues that what is needed above all are

good press and visibility. Writing Lab staff have to be willing to come when called. . . . If a dean calls with a question about what to do with a split infinitive, even if his problem is just a divided compound verb, the Center had better be able to answer the question. If an education teacher gives his students in primary education a test on language arts and finds out that they all think that the eight parts of speech include predicates, the Center had better be able to help those potential teachers. . . . As the eighties begin and enrollments shrink, we will be called on more and more often to prove our worth. (2-3)

Once again, one has the sense of "enemies" all around, of a self-defensiveness and insecurity more characteristic of an underling than of a professional. Somehow, it seems unlikely that professionals in other fields—doctors, lawyers, engineers, even English scholars—would feel as if they had "better" be willing to come when called or be willing to be on call for a split infinitive. The feeling one gets from this passage is that writing centers are perpetually on the line and could be phased out of existence for even one mistake.

Paranoia of this sort, however one might understand and identify with it, has pedagogical implications which can be less than advantageous for both tutors and students. For tutors, such excessive concern with self-justification and issues of plagiarism has generated insecurity about what is actually meant by collaboration and about what sort of assistance they ought to provide. As Trimbur point out, tutoring is "a balancing act that asks tutors to juggle roles, to shift identity, to know when to act like an expert and when to act like a co-learner" (25), and the proper balance can only occur when a true writing community is created. As Bruffee says, peer tutoring means that tutors and students talk to each other about writing and learn to write as those in the community of literate people write. "They talk about the subject and about the assignment. They talk through the writer's understanding of the subject" (645). However, overconcern with issues of ethics often results in a withholding and a rigidity which inhibits the creation of a writing community and is antithetical to the flexibility which ought to characterize a collaborative environment.

Such rigidity is highlighted in a *Writing Lab Newsletter* article published in June, 1983 in which Suzanne Edwards discusses several precepts she adheres to in training her tutoring staff, precepts which are actually

admonitions. Edward's first injunction is not to "write any portion of the paper—not even one phrase." Another is for tutors *never* to "edit the paper for mechanical errors. This includes finding or labeling the spelling, punctuation, or grammar mistakes in a paper or dictating corrections"(8). Similarly, at a recent conference, I overheard a colleague assert that she trains her tutors *never* to hold the pen or pencil. Another colleague agreed, saying that at her center tutors *never* proofread papers. Unfortunately, writing center policies seem to be characterized by a large number of "nevers."

Tutors at my own center as well have their share of *nevers*. Just the other day, one of my tutors said proudly that she *never* corrects a student's spelling; rather, she points out where the spelling mistakes are and has the student look them up in the dictionary. Otherwise, she felt, students would be given an unfair advantage. After all, she asked disdainfully, "Why should I act as a human spell-checker?" Another tutor agreed emphatically, adding that he does the same for punctuation.

Of course, in most instances, the underlying aim of policies such as these is not simply to protect the writing center from charges of plagiarism, but rather to enable students to become independent writers and learners, capable of generating and evaluating text on their own. From what learning theorists say, students learn best when they discover methods and ideas for themselves, when they are active participants in the learning process, not passive recipients of information. According to Jerome Bruner, "to instruct someone in (a) discipline is not a matter of getting him to commit results to mind. Rather it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. . . . Knowledge is a process, not a product" (72). In his discussion of tutoring, Bruner further asserts that "the tutor must direct his instruction in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the student to take over the corrective function himself. Otherwise, the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of the tutor" (53).

What seems to be overlooked in Bruner's discussion, however, are the implications of the term *eventually*. There is no question that the goal of writing centers is to make students ultimately independent of the assistance of a tutor. But perhaps during the early phases of the learning process, it might be beneficial for the tutor to assume a more active role. According to Vygotsky in his work on the relationship between development and learning in children, the most important learning occurs when teachers work with students at the "zone of proximal development," which he defines as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more capable peers” (86). Thus, in terms of writing center pedagogy, in order for tutors to help students improve as writers, they should work on “functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in an embryonic state” (86). Such functions might well require more assistance from a tutor during the initial phase, but such input does not necessarily mean that the student is not learning how to perform the task himself or would be incapable of performing a similar task at a later time. As Vygotsky asserts, “what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone” (85). Unlike primates, human beings “can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities” (88).

Vygotsky maintains that “a full understanding of the concept of the zone of proximal development must result in reevaluation of the role of imitation in learning” (87); however, as Anne Gere points out, our culture is characterized by a “predisposition against imitation,” which manifests itself as a “continuing resistance to collaborative work among writers” (4). In the past, though, imitation was a respected teaching method—at certain times, the method of choice. Referring to the development of oratory, Gere cites Isocrates’ idea that the teacher “must in himself set such an example that the students who are molded by him and are able to imitate him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm greater than that of others” (Gere 8). Cicero takes this idea one step further, asserting that through imitation, true evolution in oratory style occurs, enabling it to improve. To make this argument, “Cicero insists upon the stylistic individuality of orators who, having selected appropriate models and concentrated on their best features, improve upon what they imitate” (Gere 8). Quintilian also recommends imitation as the most effective means of developing oratory, but departs from Cicero in his recommendation to “paraphrase because of its challenge to achieve expression independent of the original” (Gere 10). In this regard, imitation may be viewed as ultimately creative, enabling the imitator to expand previous, perhaps ineffective models into something more effective which ultimately becomes his or her own. In the writing center, though, the arena in which such imitative experimentation could take place, excessive concern with plagiarism and self-protection prohibits this kind of modelling from taking place.

If we in writing centers were not so paranoid about charges of plagiarism, we would be more likely to avail ourselves of the pedagogical advantages of imitation. Thinking in terms of the “zone of proximal development,” tutors might find it useful to “show” a student how to develop examples, correct an awkward sentence, maybe rephrase something, even help a student with a

few spelling corrections. No doubt we all want students to learn to check their own spelling errors, but I think that supplying a correct spelling on occasion is unlikely to inhibit this learning. In response to my own tutor who did not want to be “a human spell checker,” I cited the numbers of students who seem to benefit from spell checkers on their computers and suggested that, for a student who has never learned how to go through a text checking for spelling errors, watching a tutor do it could be very helpful. Certainly, forbidding this sort of assistance and generally creating a set of “injunctions” or “prohibitions” as part of established writing center policy do not seem pedagogically sound. More importantly, policies of this sort should not be made without a great deal of reflection concerning their impact on student learning.

After all, where did we acquire our own style in the first place? Surely none of us are under the impression that we actually “own” a particular phrase in the sense that we were the ones who had originated it. Sometimes the suggestion of a phrase or two can be wonderfully instructive, particularly for a foreign student; often a timely suggestion of a phrase can result in the student’s adoption of that phrase as his or her own. A respected, well-published professor I know claims that his graceful coherent style is due to his undergraduate tutor at a British university. Apparently, each time he submitted a paper, the tutor would cross out any awkward sentences he found and replace them with more felicitous wording. As a student, he would faithfully imitate the style and language of his tutor, and, eventually, the tutor’s suggestions became part of his own style. Apparently, in this situation, the tutor regarded the student as a potential colleague and was not particularly worried about plagiarism.

In his essay, “Ethics of Peer Tutoring,” Gary Lichtenstein raises questions concerning the value of “defensive assertions,” which are often characteristic of writing center policies, emphasizing that ethics should be considered only “in terms of the responsibilities of the tutor to the student” (33). Conceivably, such responsibility might at times involve “showing” a student how to accomplish a particular task, engaging students in conversation so that through listening and modeling they can apprehend the language of the culture. Muriel Harris maintains that “the non-directive approach rests on the assumption that most people can help themselves if they are freed from emotional obstacles such as fear of criticism and fear of failure” (70), an idea which is valid a good part of the time. However, there are numerous occasions on which students will not be able to help themselves, despite freedom from emotional obstacles, simply because they are unfamiliar with a certain genre, register, or mode of development, and no amount of circumspect questioning is going to enable them to perform the task correctly.

Without excessive concern about plagiarism, writing center tutors would be able to experiment with imitation as a pedagogical method—showing students how to develop examples, write introductions, and vary sentence structure. Concerning the injunction against proofreading, I can see that at certain times it might be very helpful for a student, especially a foreign student, to observe how a tutor goes through a paper, noting and correcting errors, perhaps reading aloud to sense the melody of the prose or reading backwards to check for typos. Moreover, in this situation, it would not be unreasonable for the tutor to hold the pen and even to use it occasionally to write on a student paper. With the student in attendance, the tutor could illustrate how text can be manipulated and moved, on the computer or with scissors and tape. Combing a text for one more example in a literary analysis, finding a model of a movie review in a newspaper—numerous writing techniques we have developed for ourselves can be acquired by students through the use of imitation and modeling.

In a recent CCCC presentation, Barry Kroll raised some interesting questions about the traditional arguments against plagiarism, pointing out that the notion that plagiarism is counterproductive to learning is not always true. “What happens,” Kroll asks,

if one comes to suspect that plagiarism (particularly the familiar case of copying a paragraph or so from a source) does not inevitably damage learning—at least no more seriously than *quoting* the same passage would damage learning. In fact, from the view of consequences to oneself, there would seem to be no morally significant difference between quoting and copying without acknowledgment: neither is more or less likely to lead to creativity, to learning, or to independent thought. And what if one could show that copying a passage from a source sometimes leads to learning or improved writing? (5)

Of course, neither Kroll nor I feel that blatant plagiarism in any form can be justified by its potential benefit for student learning, even if such benefit could be demonstrated. My concern at this time is that we in writing centers retain a critical perspective on what has become part of established writing center policy, so that excessive prohibitions against certain forms of assistance do not become rigidly enshrined, accepted without question.

Dutifully, we all wax poetic about the benefits of collaborative learning. Yet, to a certain extent, true collaboration can occur only when collaborators are members of the same community—departmental colleagues, for instance, such as Betty and myself. True collaborators respond to one another honestly and do not withhold information from one another about trivial aspects of a paper (spelling, typos, missing commas, for example) because they fear providing too much assistance. In fact, one might venture that the more information withheld from a student and the more a tutor refrains from presenting information he knows, the more he is acting like a traditional teacher and the less likely it is that true collaboration will occur.

After all, only teachers, not colleagues, ask questions to which they already know the answers. A recent study by Sarah Freedman suggests that tutors tend to give more expository explanations to higher-achieving students, who seem to elicit them by their comments and questions. My feeling is that with such higher-achieving students, the tutor behaves more like a peer than when he deliberately withholds ideas and information, whatever his pedagogical rationale might be.

Nevertheless, a qualification that must also be kept in mind is that the term *collaboration* suggests the idea of a true partnership. Thus, I am certainly not advocating that the tutor do the preponderance of the student's work, although, as we all know, that is exactly what some students would have us do. Rather, my concern is to raise critical questions about what has become entrenched as writing center policy, questions which are similar to those raised by Lisa Ede in a recent CCCC presentation. "Why have we as a profession been so obsessed with the fear that our students might plagiarize?" Ede queries. Why have we clung so fervently to the notion of authorship as inherently individual?" (p. 9). It is time, I believe, that we in writing centers stop worrying so much about what other departments will say about our work and devote ourselves to far more noteworthy goals—to establishing a writing environment characterized by flexibility and inquiry so that true collaborative effort can flourish.

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