

1-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Ede, Lisa (1989) "Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers?," *Writing Center Journal*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1175>

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Writing as a Social Process: A Theoretical Foundation for Writing Centers?

Lisa Ede

We all have stories that help us define who we are in our personal and professional lives. For those of us who work in writing centers, these stories are generally convoluted and circuitous. Few of us planned as graduate students to direct or work in writing centers, at least few graduate students of my generation (the early 70s) did. Yet most of us are now fully committed to our centers. The work that we do is demanding and undervalued—and we'd never consider changing jobs.

I would like to begin this essay by telling you the story of my own involvement with writing centers. Like many of you, I suspect, I began my graduate studies blissfully unaware of composition as a professional field. Sometime during my dissertation years my attitude toward composition changed. And sometime during my first job teaching at a SUNY college in upstate New York, my sense of my own professional identity changed: I defined myself as a teacher and researcher of composition studies.

I read research in composition studies; I began to write articles myself. And in 1980 I accepted a job at Oregon State University where, in addition to teaching composition, I became both the coordinator of the English department's writing program and the director of the Communication Skills Center, an independent support service with a Writing Lab and non-credit classes in reading and study skills. I will spare you the saga of my early years at the Communication Skills Center—my shocked recognition that I knew nothing about running a Writing Lab, the budget deficits, the frustration of hours spent making appointments, ordering supplies, and paying bills.

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I survived these and other administrative traumas, thanks to an extraordinarily supportive staff and to English department colleagues. And thanks to my tutors (now called writing assistants, to avoid the remedial connotations of “tutor”) I became educated about collaborative learning and peer tutoring as well. My writing assistants educated me by showing me what writing assistants can—and can’t—do. With good humor and wisdom, they helped me understand collaborative learning as it occurs in actual peer conferences, not in the pages of a book.

On my campus, I became an advocate of collaborative learning and of writing centers. I spoke with conviction of the unique nature and benefits of peer tutoring to colleagues, students, administrators—anyone who would give me ten minutes of their time. At first I fought for the Center’s survival. Once we managed to get a still inadequate but permanent budget, I and my staff had the luxury of focusing on other issues.

These were satisfying years, but I was aware of a lingering sense of unease. For as I grew into my job as director—as my staff and the writing assistants continued to educate me—I recognized a troubling contradiction. Despite my convictions about the importance of our Writing Lab and the benefits of peer tutoring, I couldn’t connect my pragmatic experience and understanding of the importance of this work with my more theoretical research in composition and rhetoric. Furthermore, the research that most interested me—research on classical and contemporary rhetorical theories—seemed to intersect little with my work in the Writing Lab.

I want to be as clear as possible about the nature of this contradiction and the reasons why it troubled me. In a sense, my awareness of this contradiction simply exacerbated a schizophrenic-like bifurcation already implicit in my situation. (I have two offices in two separate buildings, for instance, and until recently I reported to two different deans.) But my unease went deeper than that. I believe strongly in the interdependence of theory and practice, as do most in our profession. Theory without practice is likely to result in ungrounded, inapplicable speculation. Practice without theory, as we know, often leads to inconsistent, and sometimes even contradictory and wrong-headed, pedagogical methods.

Yet here I was, theorizing at nights and on weekends in ways that didn’t seem to connect with my week-day work. I wondered if I was continuing the ghettoization of composition, only in a new form. The old version had literary critics theorizing while underpaid teaching assistants and instructors toiled in composition classes. Had I managed to internalize that opposition, so that the Writing Lab part of me couldn’t find anything interesting or relevant to say to the weekend theorizer? If so, I gradually realized, I was implicitly contributing to the general perception that writing centers are

“extras,” helpful additions to composition or writing across the curriculum programs that fall into the nice-to-have-if-you-can-get-it-but-not-essential category.

I have come to believe that my situation is not uncommon. For a variety of reasons, those of us who direct or work in writing centers have seldom been able to articulate theoretical support for our work that goes beyond the basic principles of collaborative learning. The most common reason for this failure, of course, is that we have been too busy working ourselves to death—running centers on inadequate or even nonexistent budgets, functioning as director, secretary, tutor, and public relations expert all at once—to take the time to theorize. Because we have in a sense been inventing ourselves as we started, developed, and defended our centers, we have naturally focused on the pragmatic.

Anyone who has found a solution to a pressing problem by consulting a treasured collection of *Writing Lab Newsletters* knows how crucial the exchange of ideas and experiences is. We need to draw upon our shared experiences, to find out how others have solved problems that we face. But one consequence of our enforced pragmatism is that we have tended to talk mainly with one another. We have succeeded in creating a niche for ourselves in the larger world of composition studies, but we have not, I fear, convinced others in our field of our centrality. We are part of but not fully integrated into our own discipline.

In *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*, Gary Olson observed that writing centers “. . . have always been diverse in their pedagogies, philosophies, and physical make-ups. But the writing center’s period of chaotic adolescence is nearly over. Center directors are slowly articulating common goals, objectives, and methodologies; and writing centers are beginning to take on a common form to evolve into a recognizable species” (vii). Olson is right: our period of adolescence is nearly over. Part of our passage into professional adulthood, however, involves grounding this “common form” in a fully articulated theory. For by so doing, we will not only clarify and justify the work we do, we will also connect in important ways with others in our field.

I believe that the time is right for those of us who direct or work in writing centers to place our work in a rich theoretical context. And we don’t need to start from scratch. We can build not only on theories of collaborative learning, as articulated by Bruffee, Hawkins, and others, but on the work of those who have recently challenged us to view writing as a social, rather than a solitary and individual, process.

In this article, I would like to comment on several lines of research that either explicitly or implicitly place writing centers at the heart, rather than

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the periphery, of current theory in composition studies. I also hope to suggest some of the ways that those of us who work in writing centers can contribute to this intellectual dialogue. For we have an important contribution to make. Because of our experiences in writing centers, we know things that composition specialists who work only with graduate students—or even those who teach undergraduate writing classes—can't know. And our centers can provide unique opportunities for research.

Most of us are familiar with the research that stimulated current interest in collaborative learning—Thom Hawkins' *Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing* and Ken Bruffee's articles and textbook. Enough time has passed since this research was published—Bruffee's first article on collaborative learning appeared in 1972, while Hawkins' book was published in 1976—for us to gain distance from it. As John Trimbur explains in "Collaborative Learning and Teaching Writing," recent interest in collaborative learning grew out of a crisis, a rapid increase in student enrollment in the 70s, which drew many underprepared students who previously would not have attended college to our campuses. One response to this crisis was the establishment of writing centers, places where these and other students could get the help they needed. Those who directed these centers were pragmatists. To the degree that they grounded their work in theory—and few had time to do this—they looked primarily to such educational reformers as John Dewey, M. L. J. Abercrombie, Edwin Mason, and Paolo Friere. They emphasized the important role that social interaction played in learning, and they argued that students who participate in collaborative learning experiences learn more effectively—do better on exams, write more effective prose—than their peers.

Although this early research emphasized the importance of the social and cultural contexts of teaching and learning, it still tended to view both writing and thinking—the creation of knowledge—as inherently individual activities. In his early essays, for instance, Bruffee at times praises collaborative learning as a means of helping student writers escape the inevitable solitariness of writing, whose self-imposed isolation is often seen as particularly troubling for beginning writers. Cognitive-developmental research does suggest that basic writers find it difficult to move from the collaboration of conversation to the more independent creation of meaning that writing entails.

Bruffee's and others' claims for collaborative learning have potentially negative implications, however. For if writing is naturally and inevitably solitary, then collaborative learning is in a sense an unnatural and, for most writers, unnecessary interruption. Implicitly, then, such a view of writing suggests that only beginning or second-best writers would need the support and collaboration that in-class peer groups and writing centers provide. *Real*

writers, experienced and professional writers, wouldn't need or seek out such concrete dialogue. Recognizing that writers naturally write alone and that, as Walter Ong states in a well-known article in *PMLA*, "the writer's audience is always a fiction," they would happily seclude themselves in their study or carrell.

I want to emphasize this point: as long as thinking and writing are regarded as inherently individual, solitary activities, writing centers can never be viewed as anything more than pedagogical fix-it shops to help those who, for whatever reason, are unable to think and write on their own. This understanding of thinking and writing not only places writing centers on the periphery of most colleges, where our second-class status is symbolized by our basement offices and inadequate staffs and budgets, it also places us on the periphery of our own field of composition studies. Think for a moment, for instance, of Flower and Hayes' cognitive-based research—research that has been particularly influential during the past decade. Where in the flow charts depicting task representation, audience analysis, and short-term and long-term memory is the box representing collaboration and conversation? As Marilyn Cooper says in "The Ecology of Writing":

The ideal writer the cognitive process model projects is isolated from the social world. . . . The solitary author works alone, within the privacy of his own mind. He uses free writing exercises and heuristics to find out what he knows about a subject and to find something he wants to say to others; he uses his analytic skills to discover a purpose, to imagine an audience, to decide on strategies, to organize content; and he simulates how his text will be read by reading it over himself, making the final revisions necessary to assure its success when he abandons it to the world of which he is not a part. The isolation of the solitary author from the social world leads him to see ideas and goals as originating primarily within himself and directed at an unknown and largely hostile other. *Writing becomes a form of parthenogenesis, the author producing propositional and pragmatic structures, Athena-like, full grown and complete, out of his brow.* (365-66; my emphasis.)

The assumption that writing is inherently a solitary cognitive activity is so deeply ingrained in western culture that it has, until recently, largely gone unexamined. Indeed, many people find it difficult to recognize that the term authorship refers not to the physical act of inscription, the process of writing texts, but to a concept. One of the best ways I've found to understand the concept of authorship is to take an historical perspective. I think you may be surprised, as I was when I first began this research, by what history tells us.

In the Middle Ages, for instance, authors simply didn't exist: no distinction was made between the person who wrote a text and the person who copied it. In *The Friar as Critic: Literary Attitudes in the Middle Ages*, Judson Boyce Allen attempts to help scholars understand what it meant to be an author or reader in this period. Aware of the difficulty of his task, Allen comments that:

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when we are faced with medieval authors . . . we are faced with a foreign, nonempirical sensibility. We are confronted by authors who are for the most part content to repeat inherited materials, making their own primary contribution . . . in the area of decoration, and often content to remain anonymous: if they name themselves, it is only in the later Middle Ages that they are not primarily doing so in order to solicit prayer. (59)

Or consider the Elizabethan period in England. When we think of this period, of course, we think of Shakespeare—now enthroned as one of the greatest authors in English literature. Surely Shakespeare typifies our contemporary notion of what it means to be an author? The fact is, however, that the conditions of the period precluded any such conception. During the Elizabethan period, for instance, only those playwrights who were also actors, and thus members of the company performing their work, could expect to receive any financial benefit other than a one-time payment. For, with a few exceptions, the actors, members of companies that functioned much like present-day cooperatives, owned the plays the company produced. Most plays, including Shakespeare's early plays, appeared without an author's name on the title page. Furthermore, once a company purchased a play, it felt free to make whatever alterations the actors wished. As Feuillerat notes in *The Composition of Shakespeare's Plays*, "A certain amount of reworking came naturally enough during the rehearsals, but far more important revisions of an author's text were frequent and often went so far as to change the very nature of the play" (7).

I wish that I could discuss the history of the concept of authorship more fully. Even a cursory historical examination indicates, however, that our modern concept of authorship, which might best be characterized as intellectual property rights (property rights that can, by their very nature, only be owned by a single person), is clearly an overdetermined concept. You can trace its development in literary history, from the tentative assertions of the claims of originality in the Renaissance to the Romantic's fully conceived argument for the primacy of the individual imagination. (In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton notes that since the Romantics, literary theory has "assumed that, in the main, at the centre of the world is the contemplative individual self, bowed over its books, striving to gain touch with experience, truth, reality, history, or tradition" [196]). The impact of Cartesianism, which established epistemology as the central branch of philosophy, further supports the assumption that the individual thinking and writing in isolation is the source of all truth worth knowing.

It is also possible to trace the impact of technology on the concept of authorship, as Elizabeth Eisenstein does in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. According to Eisenstein, "both the eponymous [or named] inventor and personal authorship appeared at the same time and as a

consequence of the same process,” the development of the printing press. “Scribal culture,” she argues, “worked against the concept of intellectual property rights. It did not lend itself to preserving traces of personal idiosyncracies, to the public airing of private thoughts, or to any of the forms of silent publicity that have shaped consciousness of self during the past four centuries” (229-230).

Still others have analyzed the way that copyright laws, which we take for granted but which were a bitter source of controversy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, codified and extended authorship. It is startling indeed to read German intellectuals in the 1840s argue that writers can no more claim their texts as permanent property, theirs for a lifetime, than a cabinetmaker can expect to profit each time a chest that he has made is purchased. Once sold, both are gone forever; they are the property of the purchaser (Woodmansee). The inextricable link between writers and their ideas, one that undergirds our notions of both authorship and plagiarism, simply didn’t exist.

I hope that this brief historical excursion doesn’t strike you as a digression, a curiosity. Recognizing that authorship is a concept, not a physical activity, and then tracing how that concept developed can help us understand why collaborative learning, and our writing centers, have always been resisted, marginalized. For although we may be unaware of it, our effort to encourage collaboration and dialogue is inherently subversive—not just of our traditional educational institutions (we have always known that), but of one of the most important, because most hidden and commonsensical, assumptions of our culture: that writing and thinking are inherently individual, solitary activities.

This historical excursion also clarifies what has always, for me at least, been a puzzling and frustrating mystery: the fact that those who most resist or misunderstand the kind of collaborative learning that occurs in writing centers are often our own colleagues in departments of English. Their immersion in our Romantic and Post-Romantic literary tradition, as well as their experience as students and teachers, has reinforced their often unconscious allegiance to the image of the solitary writer working silently in a garrett. Though they often want—and try—to support us, their acceptance of writing as a solitary act prevents them from fully doing so.

I indicated previously that the time is right for those of us who are committed to collaborative learning and writing centers to locate our work in a rich theoretical context—one that places us at the center of current theory. A number of researchers are endeavoring to articulate a theory of writing that recognizes, as Marilyn Cooper notes, that “language and texts are not simply the means by which individuals discover and communicate information, but are essentially social activities, dependent on social

structures and processes not only in their interpretive but also in their constructive phases” (367). These researchers—Marilyn Cooper, Anne Gere, Patricia Bizzell, Kenneth Bruffee, Karen LeFevre, Jim Reither, Linda Brodkey, and others—are attempting to enrich the cognitive approach to writing with what Cooper calls “an ecological model of writing, whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constructed systems” (36).

If you aren’t familiar with this research, you may be surprised to discover the diverse range of disciplines upon which these writers draw. Kenneth Bruffee’s later essays, which attempt to lay the framework for a social constructivist epistemology, cite studies in philosophy, education, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and literary criticism. Such a display of learning may seem pretentious—the unnecessary piling up of sources—but I don’t think that’s the case. What we’re witnessing is a fundamental epistemological shift, one that both draws on and will influence a broad range of disciplines, including our own.

I don’t want to mislead you, however. Not all these discussions of writing as a social process are as scholarly as Bruffee’s. Some, such as Min-Zhan Lu’s recent essay “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” are surprisingly personal. We’re not used to reading essays whose authors ground their theoretical observations in personal experience, as Min-Zhan Lu does when she discusses the conflicts she experienced growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution. For despite our adherence to an individualist and subjectivist ideology, as scholars, at least, we have insisted, in Eagleton’s words, on “abstracting personal values and qualities from the whole concrete context . . . in which they are embedded” (“The Subject of Literature,” 103). We have granted AUTHORITY—and I hope that by now you see the “author” in authority—only to those who establish their claims by referring to other texts. A number of those who advocate a social view of writing resist such restrictions, choosing instead to place themselves in a particular, contextualized scene of writing and reading (as I have tried to do in this essay).

We’ve got a lot at stake, I’ve been arguing, in the research on writing as a social process that I’ve been describing here, for such research implicitly argues for the centrality of what we do in our writing centers. We’ve also, I believe just as strongly, got a lot to contribute. A recent critique of Bruffee’s work by Greg Myers, for instance, charges Bruffee and other advocates of collaborative learning with naively refusing to recognize the role that ideology (which Myers defines as “the thoughts that structure our thinking so deeply that we take them for granted” [156]) plays in collaborative learning. Bruffee and others talk, Myers charges, as though the social construction of

reality is inevitably positive and beneficial to our students, presenting an idealized view of writing that has little resemblance to actual group dynamics.

I think that Greg Myers is at least partly right, and that those of us who work in writing centers are just the right folks to help keep theoreticians like Bruffee honest. We can do case studies, or even more detailed ethnographic analyses, for instance, of what actually happens when two or more peers collaborate. And we can learn something about the role that power and ideology play in our writing classrooms by comparing our experiences as teachers and as participants in the culture of writing centers. Last year, for instance, I kept a reading journal during a quarter when I taught a section of my university's freshman composition class and read the journals and essays written by students working as writing assistants in our lab. I was shocked to discover that my experience of reading my freshmen's essays and writing assistants' journals differed so fundamentally that I could hardly call both experiences reading. I am still considering the implications of this recognition for my teaching and for my work with students in the Writing Lab.

These examples suggest, I hope, that it is hardly necessary to master the philosophical tradition before one can contribute to the ongoing conversation about writing as a social process—though an understanding of the degree to which this movement constitutes a genuine epistemological revolution is certainly helpful. *Those of us who work in writing centers need to be part of this conversation.* This means that many of us will first have to fight for the time we need to do such thinking and writing. We will have to convince our deans or vice-presidents that our job requires us to do more than hire and train tutors, balance budgets, and promote our centers. We will, in other words, have to argue for a revised definition of our positions. But then, precisely because of our work in writing centers, we have known for quite some time that, as Min-Zhan Lu notes, writing is struggle.

I'd like to close this essay with a quotation from Bakhtin that I think applies both to us and to our students. Language, Bakhtin says, "lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and personal language . . . but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (cited in Gates, 1). It is time for us to take the word and make a real place for ourselves in the world of composition studies, and of the academy.

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