

1-1-1989

Classroom and Writing Center Collaborations: Peers as Authorities

Lisa Smulyan

Kristin Bolton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Smulyan, Lisa and Bolton, Kristin (1989) "Classroom and Writing Center Collaborations: Peers as Authorities," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1178>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Classroom and Writing Center Collaborations: Peers as Authorities

Lisa Smulyan and Kristin Bolton

Collaboration between student writers appears in various guises: small groups discuss each writer's paper in turn; a pair of classmates exchange papers to read and critique; a whole class evaluates a few students' papers based on an established set of criteria; a student shares her paper with a peer tutor at a writing center. All of these situations attempt to capture and build on the energy and shared learning that occur when students work together. And yet, while both the writing center and the classroom aim for collaborative learning, each context places the students in a different relationship. In the classroom, the students work together as peers under the teacher's guidance; in the writing center, students must work to overcome the disparity of authority inherent in their given roles of tutor and tutee. The difficulty for writing tutors lies in balancing their more powerful position as tutor with the goals of peer collaboration.

Thus, collaboration in writing takes different forms and requires different skills in the contexts of classroom and writing center. This paper will use a study of a high school writing center program to illustrate and explain these differences. We hope that this discussion will provide insight into how writing tutors perceive and cope with their roles in a writing center and how the collaboration that occurs in a writing center affects students as writers and as people.

Kenneth Bruffee's definition of collaborative learning provides a framework for understanding the difference between classroom and writing center collaboration. In his article, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" Kenneth Bruffee explains that "Collaborative learning provides a social context in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers" (644). Adapting Thomas Kuhn's theories about the scientific community, Bruffee emphasizes that a group of people together determine the accepted knowledge, the "normal discourse"

they hold. Who the students are together, the social context they weave, determines the knowledge they create. Further, collaborative learning means that people are equals—peers—on the basis of the knowledge they contribute to the collaboration.

Collaboration contributes to the writing process by involving students in the development of knowledge. More specifically, collaborative learning involves conversation. Writing is the endpoint, an individual's re-externalization, of conversation. In Bruffee's terms, then, to discuss collaborative learning in writing means to describe the kinds of conversation which arise in the classroom and the writing center.

Peers are expected to contribute equally to the conversation and, in doing so, share responsibility for the learning process. However, different levels of knowledge influence the way in which people can contribute to the collaborative effort and change the social context within which the conversation occurs. Authority based on greater knowledge has the potential to change the position of each person in a collaborative process, upsetting the balance of equals, or peers. "Social context" and "knowledgeable peers" therefore become important tools in examining the differences in collaborative learning which occur in the conversations in the classroom and the writing center.

In a study of the Strath Haven High School Writing Assistants program in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, we found that students themselves experienced the difference between classroom and writing center interaction with peers. The Strath Haven program was initiated in the spring of 1986 by a Swarthmore College professor who proposed a high school writing project modeled in part on a successful Swarthmore College program of peer writing support. During the summer of that year, this professor worked with two high school social studies teachers to plan a training course for the high school Writing Assistants (WA's) and to design a new Writing Center, which the WA's would staff.

In the first year of this program, 1986-1987, teachers selected as WA's twenty-three high-school juniors who were competent writers and who had strong interpersonal skills. These students took a one-trimester course and then served as tutors in a newly created writing center for the second and third trimesters. The course had a dual purpose: to engage the WA's in the writing process and to train them as peer tutors. Over the course of the trimester, WA's wrote three papers and then worked in groups, in pairs, and with Swarthmore College writing tutors to revise their work. They discussed the stages of the writing process, and they heard from high school faculty members in math, science, history, and English about writing in the different disciplines. They also role-played a range of writing center situations, using their own papers or those supplied by the teachers, and they

discussed strategies for effective collaboration in writing. Students also kept a weekly journal during the course and throughout their next two trimesters as Writing Assistants in the new Writing Center.

In the second and third trimesters of the school year, WA's staffed the Writing Center during their free periods. Students who wanted a WA to read and respond to their writing dropped in to the Writing Center voluntarily. Other students, whose teachers required them to have a WA read the first draft of major assignments, came to the Writing Center to fulfill this requirement. Some WA's met on a regular basis with one or two students who needed frequent help with their writing. Swarthmore College writing tutors continued to meet regularly with the high school WA's during the second and third trimesters to discuss and work on both writing and peer tutoring issues as they arose.

To examine the experiences of these WA's, we administered and analyzed two questionnaires (one from the first trimester and one from the end of the year) and the papers and journals they wrote for the program throughout the year. Analytic scoring of three papers (a persuasive essay, a book review, and a paper on some aspect of writing) for each student during the year suggested that there were some concrete improvements in the Writing Assistants' writing, notably in the areas of organization and support of ideas and the development of a personal style or voice. The questionnaires and journals revealed that the Writing Assistants believed that their writing skills and their attitudes toward writing had improved as a result of participation in this program. For some, this meant gaining confidence; for others, it meant enjoying writing; and for yet others, it was an excitement about having learned about the writing process. Both the journals and questionnaires also show that the WA's developed a language for talking about writing, one that would allow them to engage in conversation about the writing process or a particular piece of writing. They talked, for example, about their new ability to use pre-writing strategies to get started on a piece of writing and the importance of a thesis statement to guide their written work.

In the papers and journals, as well as in the questionnaires, many students brought up collaboration. They described their enjoyment in working with others in the classroom situation during the first trimester and often called for more of this kind of experience. They also spoke of their anxieties and frustrations in collaborating with peers in the writing center. This difference in their descriptions of their experiences led us to explore these two types of collaboration. What was there about tutoring in the Writing Center that made WA's anxious when they seemed very comfortable with classroom tutoring and collaboration? How did WA's respond to the apparent pressures of Writing Center collaboration?

In the first questionnaire, the WA's often mentioned that their favorite aspect of the course was working with one another through response groups, role playing, and large group critiques of papers. Their first paper went through a group response experience, in which everyone read all the papers and tried to arrive at common criteria for a good paper. For several students, these response groups (one form or another) were the best part of the class. Many students mentioned that they liked having a second reader and discussing what makes a good paper; they all had the power and skill to comment on one another's papers. Although they all recognized the better writers in the class, they also had confidence in their own ability, confirmed by their having been selected for the program and their practice in tutoring. They would be tutors in one exercise, and tutees in the next. The social context of the classroom established an equality among them, so that they worked in those collaborative formats as peers.

In spite of having enjoyed collaborative learning in class, the WA's found their work in the Writing Center more difficult as they shifted from students to peer-tutors. For example, after a trimester of working with her peers in the class, one WA wrote in her journal, "How on earth am I going to be able to work one-on-one with kids and not put words in their mouth (or on their paper)? Plus—what happens when someone won't accept any of your criticism?" After having worked in the Writing Center for several months, another student wrote, "I often feel guilty for suggesting so many ideas or making so many corrections." Tori Haring Smith, in a 1985 writing conference at Bucknell, noted that "peer-tutor" is an oxymoron: although the participants are both students, and roughly the same age—peers—the WA has a different position in learning than the student. The peer-tutor sits on a fence, with the students on one side and the teachers on the other. Both students participating in tutoring are knowledgeable, but the knowledge is unbalanced because it is in different areas and because the Writing Assistants' knowledge gives them authority in the writing center. The social context for conversation changes: instead of being students working together with people they know, the WA's become writing authorities, in control of the learning that happens in their tutoring sessions, with people they might not know. The writing center creates pressure on and frustration for the Writing Assistants because of the higher level of responsibility for learning, a pressure clearly absent for them in the classroom.

When the Strath Haven Writing Assistants discussed the problems they had in working with students' papers, they talked as much about interpersonal dynamics as their work on writing. That is, establishing a rapport and having a good conversation with the tutee was as vital and as difficult a part of the tutoring process as was understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the paper. The social context of conversation for many of them was an

essential component of the tutoring session. One WA remarked in his journal: "Regardless of the amount of technical knowledge we have, if we cannot communicate with our tutees, the program is useless." We found, however, that the WA's initially responded to this new social context and its demands in two different ways. Some chose to assume the authority their training in writing and tutoring had given them, to become teachers or directors of a student's learning in the Writing Center. For example, one WA recalls, "I remember one time I spent the whole period debating my tutee about Star Wars. I think the tutee learned a lot from what I had to say and how to defend his position in the paper." This kind of tutor created a social context that emphasized one authority in the learning process: the WA. For this kind of tutor, a good conference meant successfully getting ideas across to tutees.

Other WA's (those who understood and acted more on the program's goals) worked to create a collaborative process in the Writing Center by giving away or sharing the authority imposed upon them by their title and training. For this kind of tutor, writing conferences were conversations in which the WA listened, drew out what the writer was trying to express, and helped him or her find ways of expressing it. As one WA said:

I think I became a better tutor throughout the course of the year. I could find questions like "What does this statement mean?" and then lead the student on his or her own thought process. At times it seemed much easier just to tell the student what to write, but that wouldn't really benefit the student in the long run.

This WA learned to collaborate by redirecting her own potential authority to the student, in this case by asking questions.

All of the WA's experienced the same training program and the same Writing Center context, yet some chose a more directive position while others chose a more collaborative position in the process of peer interaction. It appears that the difference results from a combination of factors: WA's who were more directive tended to have more aggressive personal styles of interaction and a sense of confidence in knowing the rules of good writing even before they entered the program. WA's who took a more collaborative stance also had confidence—confidence that they had learned the skills needed to work through a writing problem. The program took students with different levels of confidence and different personal styles and tried to move them toward an approach to tutoring that emphasized collaboration.

The program was successful in that, over the course of the year, many of the WA's did come to see their challenge as creating a collaborative situation within a context of authority. Their concerns about being a WA shifted from wondering whether people would show up at the Writing Center or whether they would be able to find things to talk about in students' papers

to trying to figure out how to get the student who came to the Writing Center more actively involved in the conversation about writing. The WA's described four possible roles taken by students who came to the Writing Center: passive, easily-influenced, stubborn, and hesitant. They explained that the session was most problematic when students did not participate equally in the tutoring session. The problems they described centered around their concern that their authority upset the social context and equality needed for collaboration.

In discussing the positive aspects of being a Writing Assistant, the WA's mentioned various personal benefits (e.g. better self-image, fun), improved writing skills, and a sense of their effectiveness in helping someone as a peer—other students were receptive, and the WA could approach the student from a common understanding, “mak[ing] comments that a teacher [could] not,” as one WA wrote. The negative elements of their role, however, were described solely in terms of peer interaction. Because of their title and training, they had a different status which made it difficult to relate to their friends in the Writing Center, “because it changes the roles of the relationship.” This status also intimidated the students with whom the WA's worked, who were “afraid to share their writing,” or “took everything I said as law.” On the other hand, because the WA's were students, they felt that they did not have enough authority at times in the interaction: students did not “take [them] seriously.” As they became more sensitive to the learning situation, the WA's developed an understanding of the differences in classroom and writing center collaboration and became aware of their responsibility to create a collaborative situation from the position of authority that both they and the students seemed to recognize.

In the classroom, the Writing Assistants learned a model of collaborative peer interaction which they took with them into the Writing Center: “I want them to see me as an assistant, a helper, a guide, a peer, not a strict perfectionist, a brain, and a teacher's pet.” However, because the social context of the classroom defines students as peers, it cannot simulate the problem of authority that is created when Writing Assistants tutor other students. In the Writing Center, the WA has to develop skills of listening, questioning, and sharing that help to create a learning context in which both students share the responsibility for what, and how, they learn.

Works Cited

- Bruffee, Kenneth. "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" *College English* 46 (1984): 635-52.
- Haring-Smith, Tori. "Bumblebees Flying, Peer Tutoring, and Other Things That Aren't Supposed to Work." Second Annual Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, October 1985.

Lisa Smulyan is Assistant Professor of Education and Associate Director of the Writing Program at Swarthmore College. Prior to her work at Swarthmore, she taught secondary English and social studies. She received her Ed.D. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1984. In 1986 she initiated the Strath Haven High School/Swarthmore College collaborative writing program, some of which is described in this article.

Kristin Bolton graduated with high honors from Swarthmore College in May 1988 as an English major, history minor, and a Swarthmore College Writing Associate. She was an active participant in the Strath Haven High School/Swarthmore College collaborative writing program, working on a regular basis with the high school Writing Assistants described in this article.