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Richard Behm

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Ethical Issues in Peer Tutoring: A Defense of Collaborative Learning

Richard Behm

I have been director of the Mary K. Croft Academic Achievement Center, a combined reading, writing, and professional resource center for faculty and students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. Previously I had worked in our writing lab for eight years. Over this period of time, I was dimly aware that some colleagues, both within the English department and outside of it, had reservations about what it is we did in the writing lab and how we did it. These reservations ranged from uncertainty about the soundness of using peer tutors to questions about whether the university should devote resources to helping students who, in the view of some faculty, were getting remedial help.

I felt we could answer most of these concerns through appeals to research findings and university policy or else by involving faculty in the center so that they had a voice in running things. In the last year, however, our tutoring program was challenged by an English faculty member on the grounds that we were in violation of university policy because the tutorial assistance that we were providing to students was a form of plagiarism. His point was that one of the most important functions a university serves is certifying students, making judgments about their abilities so that employers and others may determine fitness for jobs and so on. When a student receives assistance on a draft of a paper, or even discovering ideas for a paper that is to be graded, the work is no longer solely that of the student, and thus this certifying function is subverted.

The arguments that what we were doing was within the mainstream of writing centers across the country and that the effectiveness of peer tutoring was supported by a wide variety of research did not impress this individual. He denounced all such efforts, including those by teachers who critique

drafts before grading the final copy, as unethical. It was his wish that the hand of God should descend upon us all and prevent us from committing further such heinous deeds.

It was tempting to dismiss him as a crank, since by his own admission he didn't know much about research and theory in writing pedagogy and he facetiously dismissed all educational research as bogus. And certainly there were practical ways we could deal with his objection, at least as far as his students were concerned. Yet, his complaint stayed with me. I consider myself an ethical person, and I was disturbed that I could not readily counter his objection. I know for a fact that when I grade my students' final papers, papers drafted, revised, and edited in consultation with me and their peers, those papers are better written than they would have been without such assistance. And they received higher grades, grades earned in part through collaboration, grades it's unlikely they would have merited if I had simply given them assignments and told them when they were due. Perhaps it was as much insecurity about the propriety of a teaching methodology I had found effective as it was a concern for defending peer tutoring that led me to explore and contemplate this issue. Through my readings, discussions, and meditations over the last few months, I have concluded that not only is collaborative learning of the kind my colleague objects to ethical, but it is also the heart of learning. Such collaborative learning is essential to a university and has a long and honorable history. Indeed, as Mary P. Deming in "Peer Tutoring and the Teaching of Writing" asserts, "If one would randomly open the pages of the history of education, one would discover instances of peer tutoring in its various guises, in every country of the Western World during every historical era" (2).

Deming traces formalized peer tutoring back to Aristotle. Informal peer tutoring, of course, probably went on among Aristotle's students much the way it goes on among contemporary college students. John Trimbur observes that peers helping peers "has been operating all along in the folkways of student culture, in the rap sessions and informal study groups outside the official academic structures. Students have always banded together to interpret and cope with their undergraduate experience" (88). With or without a writing center, tutoring and collaboration among students on writing tasks will take place.

The aversion to collaborative learning can be traced in great part to the increasing emphasis on the certifying function of education, an emphasis that threatens to pervert learning from pre-school through higher education, to turn teacher and student alike from the pursuit of truth, the sharing of knowledge, and the development of educated citizens. There is a higher moral imperative than that demanded by the contemporary university's

certifying function, an imperative clearly articulated in the traditional mission of a university as a place of teaching and learning.

The emphasis on certification in our educational system is, of course, a response to a demand from the larger society—namely, that the schools sort and grade individuals, even if that sorting and grading is cruel or antithetical to the true and noble aims of education. As George B. Leonard argues in *Education and Ecstasy*,

Right answers, specialization, standardization, narrow competition, eager acquisition, aggression, detachment from the self. Without them, it has seemed, the social machinery would break down. Do not call the schools cruel or unnatural for furthering what society has demanded. (124)

The question that faces us as educators in general, and as writing center practitioners in particular, is clear, even if the answer isn't. Do we adhere to this narrow, specialized definition of education as certification or do we assert the primacy of education as a life-long process of self-discovery, of personal growth and change, in which certification is at best a nuisance and, at worst, a hindrance to learning?

Our seeking for an answer is complicated by the fact that writing centers are part of the larger political institution of the university, and the university a mirror of the larger political realities of society. These realities mandate that, despite all the lip-service paid to noble ideals in most mission statements in higher education, universities become certifying bodies in which the gaining of the proper credentials seems more important than real learning. And when certification is the guiding principle of education, a kind of paranoia pervades the whole enterprise. Instead of asking questions such as "How can I help my students move from novice to master?" or "How can I help them learn, grow, change?" or "How can I help them realize their potentials?", we must focus on "How can I ensure that I won't be called on the carpet and embarrassed when a colleague or someone out there in the real world comes back and says the students I've taught can't write good lab reports or business letters or sales campaigns?" It is this kind of false accountability that has led us into the fun-house of competency testing.

Personally, I have grown weary of "real-world" arguments to justify either what we do or how we do it. I assert that each day in college is "the real world," and we are about a very important task, one that overshadows the political mandate to certify students as accountants or restaurant managers or English teachers. I want to proclaim with Leonard that "Education, at best, is ecstatic" (20). Education is both joyous and demanding, and we cannot now nor should we ever be able to tell the dancer from the dance.

Such a view of education seeks to limit the cruelty inherent in meritocracy, changing the focus from “sorting” to “helping,” from “grading and certifying” to “sharing and exploring.”

In an effective writing center the tutor and the learner are truly collaborators, peers involved in a give and take, a communal struggle to make meaning, to clarify, to communicate. The kind of collaborative learning that marks effective peer tutoring programs is a very basic act of sharing, one that often extends well-beyond completing a particular academic exercise. In fact, I am convinced that peer tutoring and other kinds of collaborative learning gather power in proportion to the degree of cooperative involvement in the endeavor. Collaborative learning becomes a kind of joint investment, a mutual fund that has many potential yields to both tutor and learner. In the best peer tutoring, the distinction between tutor and learner is often blurred. I know I have experienced this many times when tutoring my own students—moments when in our discussion about a piece of writing, I have learned as much or more than the student, either about myself, about my writing, or about writing in general.

Although collaborative learning has many applications, nowhere is it more appropriate than in writing. Writing is not, and never has been, the lonely, individual act many have envisioned and to which English teachers seem especially attracted.

As a writer for a variety of publications, from *Sports Illustrated* to *The Kenyon Review*, with stops at *Yankee*, *English Education*, and *Sports Afield* in between, I know that writing is a process whereby one person interacts with others in the creation of a final project. No writer works in a vacuum. Perhaps only one other person responds, spouse or editor, teacher or peer tutor. Perhaps a number of people respond at various stages. An idea is bounced around in a group discussion. Perhaps a friend or editor suggests the topic, presents a new angle, gives the idea a new spin. Perhaps someone suggests a major change in direction, organization, or content. Perhaps someone provides a lead, recommends reading a certain article, suggests a major change in the introduction. Perhaps a trusted somebody helps edit and proofread a draft. Perhaps someone produces the final copy.

Such collaborative efforts are the norm for the working writer. They are givens under which I and others operate. Paragraphs that I have not written have miraculously appeared in my articles. What I had thought of as my best images have disappeared. Editors have told me what to write, how to revise. They have edited for me. Attentive proofreaders have caught a plethora of embarrassing errors. Such is the writing world as I know it.

The naturally collaborative process of writing differs from collaborative learning as it might take place in mathematics. The differences between

problem-solving in mathematics and problem-solving in writing are significant. In mathematics, some claim there are no gray areas. In writing, there are few black and white areas. In mathematics, one may reasonably expect transfer from the tutoring situation to the test situation. In writing, the prospect of transfer is much less certain, in great part because rarely are two writing situations identical. The processes learned in a tutorial about writing may not readily transfer to the “test” writing task.

For instance, in mathematics, one might work collaboratively in a tutorial setting to learn how to solve long division, going over the theory of long division, building upon principles learned in simple division, repeating instructions as needed, helping the learner discover why certain errors are made and how to avoid them in the future. Finally, after a certain period of time, the “Eureka” light goes on, the learner sees and understands the process and is able to “do” long division. The learner is able to prepare for the test situation by moving from collaborative problem-solving to independent problem-solving. The learner performs well on the test; the collaborative learning that occurred in the tutorial sessions is pronounced a success. Based on the test results, the teacher and the institution are comfortable certifying the student as having mastered long division.

Contrast this with the tutorial-test setting in traditional English composition classes, looking at a relatively simple, straightforward assignment to write a description of a person, place, or thing. To prepare the student for this task, the tutor may work with the student in writing a descriptive paper, using instructions provided by the instructor and the text, drawing on the tutor’s own experience with similar tasks, and building from what the student already knows about writing. Over a period of time, the learner and tutor create a descriptive paper, in which they attempt to meet the expectations of the instructor, the text, the tutor, and the learner. It is very much a collaborative effort. Perhaps, in some ideal world, tutor and learner have weeks in which to master the descriptive essay and are able to repeat the process three times, collaboratively creating essays about Uncle Boris, Thanksgiving dinner, and an odorous gym locker.

One might think that after such collaborative efforts, the student would be reasonably well-prepared for our hypothetical test situation, having three times written descriptive essays. The instructor, wishing to ensure the validity of the test and longing to up-hold the certifying function of the university, models the test situation after that of mathematics, asking the students to write a descriptive essay in class. Of course, just as the mathematics instructor does not give the students the exact same long division problems in the test as in the math tutorials, the writing instructor does not give the students the exact same topics in the in-class writing as in the writing tutorials.

The instructor enters the classroom, gazes out over the assembled students, including our well-tutored representative, and announces, "For your mid-term, in-class essay, you will write a descriptive essay about . . . (long dramatic pause) . . . me."

Now, I submit that, though this is a descriptive essay, as a writing situation it is profoundly different from any that the student may have encountered in the three previous descriptive exercises. Certainly, the student may be aware that some principles apply: the need for organization and the desirability of including exact detail and vivid phrases, for example. These principles, however well-drilled the student is in them, will not see the student through the many possible pitfalls in the dramatically new writing situation. The student must now confront problems not previously addressed, such as the audience's possible response to the essay. Specifically, how will the teacher react if the student describes him as having a "bulbous, acne-scarred nose with a dreary moustache clinging below," or writes that "the balloon of his stomach threatens to burst the buttons on his ketchup-stained shirt." The school-wise student will ignore the principles of effective description and play it safe, resorting to either bland generalizations or boldface distortions of the truth.

I have, perhaps, exaggerated to make my point, but the point is important. Each writing situation presents a new set of problems, some of which may be solved by applying some learned principles about effective writing, but others of which will be best dealt with through ongoing collaboration, an interaction with friends, colleagues, editors, teachers, tutors, or the vibrant voice of self that surfaces in meditative moments. Unless we reduce writing to knowing and applying a few simplistic rules—always have a thesis statement as the first sentence in your essay; never write a sentence fragment; each paragraph should have three to five sentences; never end a sentence with a preposition—and measure the effectiveness of the writing only according to these arbitrary and demonstrably incorrect rules, the conventional methods of testing and certifying students as having mastered a skill cannot be easily adapted to writing. In fact, the entire theory upon which much of modern education is based is inappropriate for teaching and learning writing.

In his book, *Learning From Our Mistakes: A Reinterpretation of Twentieth Century Educational Theory*, Henry J. Perkinson discerns three metaphors for education: the initiation theory, the transmission theory, and the growth theory. He traces the initiation theory to Plato's myth of the cave, the emergence of the mind from darkness into light (8). In education, the metaphor has been reincarnated recently by E. D. Hirsch's notion that the primary function of education is to initiate people into the culture through learning about the culture's "sacred" texts. The initiation theory holds that knowledge of these texts will produce better human beings.

In Perkinson's scenario, the initiation theory inevitably gave rise to the transmission theory. With the development of the transmission theory,

Education was no longer a procedure for initiation through which the young came to submit to the interdictions of their culture. Instead, education had become a process of transmission through which the young could be disciplined, or trained, or socialized to the wishes of the adults responsible for them. (11)

This theory, which dominates education today, is at the heart of the conflict between what a writing center does and what some, including my colleague, seem to perceive as the role of the university.

Perkinson favors instead a variation of the Dewey growth theory of education, a variation based in great part on Darwin. In this Darwinian metaphor, students and teachers are seen as "fallible creators of knowledge" and "organisms that seek order" (170). Perkinson asserts that the educative environment mandated by the Darwinian theory has three characteristics: "it is free; it is responsive; and it is supportive" (171).

I submit these are the three characteristics that typify successful writing centers. As in Perkinson's growth metaphor, the focus in the successful writing center is on first discovering what it is the learner already knows and showing a respect for the knowledge and skills learners possess when they walk through the door. And the role of the tutor in collaborative learning is, as in Perkinson's model, "to create a responsive environment, teacher/tutor and student/learner engage in a critical dialogue that is focused on what is already known, moving, through trial and error, toward an understanding of the nature of the problems and examining possible solutions, thereby creating "new" knowledge.

Given the conflict between the transmission theory, which has as its primary concern judging and certifying, and the growth theory, which has as its primary concern creating a responsive and supportive environment in which fallible human beings may grow, it would seem that writing centers are forever destined to be at odds with others in the educational enterprise. Kenneth Bruffee frames this conflict when he observes that in the traditional classroom model in which the transmission theory dominates "collaboration is considered irresponsible; in the extreme, collaboration is the worst possible academic sin, plagiarism" (636).

I contend that collaborative learning as practiced in most writing centers is not plagiarism, that it is not only ethical but also reflective of the way people really write. From the folk traditions of early ballads to Pound's extensive revisions of Eliot's *Wasteland*, from the practices of professional editors and writers to writing centers and classrooms, collaboration is a natural part of the social act of writing. To ignore this fact, and to deny students such opportunities—yes, such collaborative assistance—simply

cannot be justified. In fact, I would argue that the truly unethical act is *not* making such collaborative learning available to students, bowing to the demand to certify them instead of acknowledging the primary imperative of educating them.

Does this mean that no lines can be drawn between tutor and learner, between writer and helper, whether that helper be friend, teacher, or editor? Absolutely not. In fact, the line is surprisingly easy to draw. Responsibility is the key word. Ultimately, the writer assumes the responsibility, making choices among a variety of recommendations, accepting or rejecting advice, determining exactly what the final product will be and risking accountability for the consequences of the decisions. It is in the gray areas of writing that authorship is established when decisions are made. Accepting this responsibility is both the burden and the joy of authorship. As Professors Victoria Aarons and Willis A. Saloman assert in a recent paper on peer tutoring, the peer tutor is a facilitator; the writer must retain control and authority over the document, while tutor and learner engage in a “dialogic process” (3-5). I am convinced that it is authority, real authorship, which is too often denied to students, denied not only by the social interaction of collaborative learning, but by the compulsion of a teacher (or tutor) to control all aspects of writing in order to fulfill the certifying function of the university. In such controlled situations, the student has only one legitimate response: “Tell me exactly what you want me to do, and I will try to do it.”

Let me conclude by summarizing the collaborative efforts that have gone into creating this particular piece of discourse. I would first, and not without some irony, have to acknowledge my debt to my colleague who challenged the validity of peer tutoring. He gave me the idea for this paper, and if he had not raised the issue, I doubt I would have written this. I must also acknowledge frequent conversations with at least a half-dozen peers about this issue, some of whom knew I was working on a paper while others didn't. All of them were important in shaping my thinking about the issues involved. Whatever merit this paper has is in great part the result of the ideas of many whom I spoke with while preparing to write the first draft.

As the paper is being written, my wife, Mary, serves as the main critic. To be honest, she is the gentlest of critics. Not that she will not call some blatant idiocy to my attention, but she knows me too well. Too harsh a criticism early on in the process of writing is likely to deter me from completing a project. She prods, praises, makes suggestions, edits, and serves as a sounding board as I write.

After about the fifth draft, I feel confident enough to share the written product with colleagues. I fear this immensely, fully expecting them to tell me that my ideas are stupid and that I couldn't write my way out of a bad novel. These colleagues are, without fail, respectful, helpful, and encouraging. One

suggests an article on reading and cultural transmission that I might want to include. She goes through the trouble of procuring me a copy of this wonderful article, directly related to the information I present from Perkinson. I struggle twice to use it, and finally admit I can't fit it in. I know the article would help my argument, but I don't have the skill to make it work.

Another colleague, notorious for his skill and ruthlessness as an editor of balky prose, takes the paper home. He comes in the next day with many helpful revisions, most focusing on issues of clarity and style. I use some, adapt others, ignore still others. All, plus my secretary, have corrected some obvious typos and grammatical bugaboos. My trusty spellchecker does the final proofreading for spelling errors.

Finally, I ship the article off to the journal you are now reading. Four weeks later, the letter comes back accepting the article—but insisting on some changes. The editor has done some copy editing for me, and she agrees with one of the reviewers that I should axe a couple of sections. Two sections are easy to chop out, and I do so with little effort or regret. I find it very difficult to change the longer section; it seems crucial to my argument. I am able, at the editor's suggestion, to change the transition into the section, and that seems to help.

It's my wife's turn at it. With her assistance, I am able to slash out another three paragraphs, change the wording of the ending, and eliminate some other syntactical tangles. I'd like to have more time—and more help—but the deadline to return the article approaches and I have two others to finish in the next three weeks.

What are we to make of this extraordinary collaborative effort that comes before you with my name attached? Are we, as educators and writing center professionals, supposed to deny to young writers, novice writers, the collaborative assistance that is part of the on-going process of learning to become a writer? Isn't a writer always in a state of becoming? We can deny such assistance only if we quietly capitulate to the pressure and agree that certification is more important than education, only if we contradict the research demonstrating the efficacy of collaborative learning, and only if we assert that inexperienced writers are not entitled to the same collaborative help that all professional writers routinely expect and receive.

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Richard Behm is a Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where he directs the Mary K. Croft Academic Achievement Center.