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College Culture and the Challenge of Collaboration

Art Young

Those of us in composition studies know “collaboration” has arrived as a central focus for the teaching of writing. Andrea Lunsford, in an article in the Fall 1991 issue of The Writing Center Journal, mentions that when she and Lisa Ede read a coauthored paper at the 1985 CCCC conference, theirs was the only paper on the subject of collaboration and the only paper with the word “collaboration” in the title. Those of you who attended the 1992 CCCC in Cincinnati can attest to how much things have changed in seven short years. It seemed like about every third panel was on the subject of collaboration, with papers on everything from peer critiquing and coauthoring to situating collaborative learning in democratic ideology or problematizing it within the implicitly hierarchical structures of research universities.

Yet, each of us returns from CCCC (or the East Central Writing Centers Association Conference) to the culture of our own campuses, where we must work with faculty and administrators who don’t go to CCCC, who don’t read national reports from the Carnegie Foundation or the National Science Foundation that call for an increased emphasis on small-group activity with a corresponding decreased emphasis on rote recall, who don’t hear business leaders when they support group decision-making processes in all aspects of the workplace. We return to colleagues who, in many cases, presuppose that thinking about pedagogy is a sign of academic weakness. Many teachers and educators are not moved to rethink traditional pedagogies, even when they realize that knowledge is socially constructed and that all writing in some sense is collaborative in nature. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede’s finding that
most writing done in industry is primarily collaborative is not the kind of
teachers-centered instructors or Paulo Freire's banking-concept teachers
want to hear.

Collaborative writing, group projects, peer critiquing—these things are
not a panacea, as all of us know. They can lead to bad teaching and students
being shortchanged. Thus, on our own campuses, we find not only ignorance
and incredulity about the value of collaborative pedagogy in learning, but
mistrust and hostility as well. For some of our colleagues, from their
experiences as students and as teachers, collaborative pedagogy goes against
everything they believe represents good teaching and everything they've
learned about being successful as a professor. They identify with Robert
Martin who in responding to "Pedagogy of the Distressed" by Jane Tompkins
in College English writes,

Students aren't often fooled when their teacher "trusts" them
enough to have them break into groups. They know that this is most
often a tacit conspiracy involving lazy or over-worked students and
a lazy or over-worked teacher to let everyone off easy. But most
university students feel cheated when a teacher takes it easy. They
are there to learn something, and they expect their teachers, who are
being paid, after all, to work. (358)

Because collaborative learning and pedagogy threaten many and are misun-
derstood by others, those of us who believe that knowledge is developed and
negotiated socially—and that such knowledge can be transforming—and
not just a lesson in regurgitation, intellectual laziness, or one-upmanship—
we have work to do. Those of us who know that in the hands of a
knowledgeable and purposeful teacher or tutor, collaborative pedagogy is
more and not less work than preparing a lecture on Melville, for example, a
lecture that with slight modifications might be used again and again over the
next twenty or thirty years—we have work to do. Those of us who believe
that collaborative pedagogy can and often does work to improve students'
knowledge, understanding, and performance—we have work to do.

Some of you may be asking, why us? Well, because we are in composition
studies, because we are in writing centers, because we are in writing-acros-
the-curriculum (WAC) programs, and because, therefore, collaboration with
students, faculty, and administrators is fundamental to who we are and what
we do. The collaborative paradigm is not new to us. Writing centers have
been places for collaboration from their beginnings: for tutoring, for
conferencing, for the talk that brings clarity to purpose and ideas, for the
listening that empowers those who would write and speak. Writing centers
were founded on an alternative vision of the way many people learn and
develop facility with language. Writing centers and WAC programs, those
founded in the seventies and eighties, were frequently conceived in the
expressionistic rhetoric and process pedagogy of James Britton, Peter Elbow,
Janet Emig, Toby Fulwiler, Ken Macrorie, James Moffett, and Mina Shaughnessy, and they were founded on deceptively simple principles of human interaction, social negotiation, and contextual language development. And while such centers and programs have been collaborative in theory and in practice from their beginnings, they also were founded quite deliberately on the American myth of individualism, a belief that each individual deserves an opportunity, or I should say multiple opportunities, to reach or even overextend his or her potential. They also were founded as a challenge to the prevailing myth of mass education as practiced then and now: that people become knowledgeable, empowered, and literate by sitting in scan-tron lectures with two hundred other students; that they become academically literate by being taught to write in one semester by a part-time teacher with seventy five other writing students on that campus, not even counting another fifty composition students at another community college across town.

At first, administrators did not understand this new vision for education represented by upstart writing centers and WAC programs, which is why in the early seventies, they wanted us to use machine learning, mostly audiotapes and workbooks, in what was then aptly called our writing laboratories, or why they wanted us to assess our fledgling WAC programs with a standardized test, a test students were expected to pass to achieve junior standing or be doomed to take yet another bonehead English course, or why they misinterpreted WAC as a movement that would finally bring correct and rigorous standards to the entire campus by imposing on all disciplines the "theme penalty sheet" (a theme with two major errors, such as comma splices, receives an automatic F').

In the rush to problematize rhetorical theories, scholars are as prone to misconstrue as administrators. When Andrea Lunsford writes, as others have written, that writing centers founded on expressionistic rhetorics (like those of Elbow and Macrorie) "view knowledge as interiorized, solitary, individually derived, individually held," she surely overstates the case (5). I've heard scholars denigrate freewriting as recommended by Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow because it promotes a false sense of the writer as autonomous. Such scholars seem to be saying that since all language use is socially grounded, including freewriting, that teachers and writers should privilege collaborative strategies that explicitly underscore the social nature of language and avoid cognitive or expressionist strategies that reinforce the American cultural myth of individualism. James Berlin writes in College English, "Expressionistic rhetoric is easily co-opted by the very capitalist forces it opposes. After all, this rhetoric can be used to reinforce the entrepreneurial virtues capitalism values most: individualism, private initiative, the confidence of risk taking, the right to be contentious with authority (especially the state)" (487). Thus, for some scholars, using techniques from expressionistic rhetoric, such as freewriting or journal writing, is implicitly
choosing individualism over community, competition over collaboration, capitalism over socialism.

Denying the implicitly social nature of Macrorie’s discussions of “Engfish,” or failing to recognize the essentially collaborative nature of writing centers before 1985, is to create competing camps in composition studies where they need not exist. We must recognize that there are conceptual parallels between Macrorie’s analysis of “Engfish” and his insistence on remedies such as “I-Search” and personal voice and Paulo Freire’s analysis of the banking concept of education, in which teachers deposit units of knowledge into the initially empty and always underfunded passbook account of students’ minds, and his insistence on “problem posing” and “critical consciousness” as remedies. Both Macrorie, the Romantic expressionist, and Freire, the Marxist social constructionist, recognize the psychological and social alienation of the individual, an alienation reinforced by socially sanctioned attempts to impose the language use of the dominant class on the “other” classes, and thus to impose the dominant class way of viewing the world on everyone else. Both of these reformers, Freire and Macrorie, resist pedagogies designed to teach people to ape such language use without fully comprehending the implications of doing so; both devise pedagogies designed to help us and our students not only to find voice through language but also to find voice in social action.

Berlin and Lunsford’s critiques of expressionistic rhetoric and pedagogy and Martin’s critique of social constructionist rhetoric and pedagogy provide us with useful perspectives on our everyday lives as teachers of writing. They help us reevaluate our own theoretical assumptions and teaching practices, and they help us understand the perspectives of colleagues (from the right and the left) on our own campuses who voice similar doubts and criticisms. But neither critique encompasses my experience with students, with writers, with citizens, an experience that suggests to me there are multiple ways of knowing and that literacy and proficiency with language can be either tools for liberation or tools for domination. I’m sure Berlin understands that what he calls social-epistemic rhetoric currently is being “co-opted” to reinforce entrepreneurial capitalism by business executives who subscribe to the “Total Quality Movement.” TQM espouses worker-teams collaborating with management in decision making about all important company functions. As I understand it, the concept of TQM was inspired by Japanese business practices, and those practices were compatible with Japanese culture in which individualism is not the powerful cultural force that it is in America. Because Japan seems to be succeeding better than the U. S. at entrepreneurial capitalism, we have the ironic situation of capitalist executives and leftist scholars both trying to deconstruct American individualism.

Let me repeat, writing centers represent an alternative vision in American higher education of how people learn and become empowered; writing
centers are not neutral players in the debates over educational and political reform; they reject the assembly-line model of education, which makes efficiency the highest goal. Writing centers are not the ideological center between the right and the left; they do not operate without theory, and they should not subscribe to an unreflective pedagogy that does whatever seems to work best, in which the concept of “best” is not thoroughly critiqued. I agree with Berlin when he writes, “every pedagogy is imbricated in ideology, in a set of tacit assumptions about what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed” (492).

Many of us in composition studies, neo-Romantics and social constructionists alike, whether we be tutors, teachers, facilitators, or writing center directors or some combination of the four, also agree with Lunsford when she writes that a collaborative learning environment “rejects traditional hierarchies” (6) and “goes deeply against the grain of education in America” (7). We know what she means when she says we are “a subversive group” (9). So how do we come to know our campus culture and then set about subverting the traditional divisions and hierarchies that often deny productive social relations and educational practices? Although most American education systems share a paradigm with features such as rigid hierarchies and isolated, competing academic units, we also need to be grounded in our particular campus culture. Freire’s pedagogy was successful because it suited its local contexts—the barrios of Brazil and the villages of Guinea-Bissau. It worked because it answered the felt needs of his learners. It was so grounded in the local culture that originally distinct lessons were devised for each village. Macrorie was successful for similar reasons; in Upstart, Macrorie describes strategies that helped mostly middle-class American students become empowered to develop and negotiate knowledge with others. We should remember that Macrorie (and Elbow, Moffett, Shaughnessy, etc.) wrote the books that changed the teaching of composition in fundamental ways during or right after the social activism of the sixties and seventies. They wrote out of the collective protests against social injustice and banking-concept educational practices that existed on campuses at that time. Thus, we too need to understand the local culture of our particular campus in order to develop those collaborative strategies which might assist us in subverting education as usual and in demonstrating the usefulness and the justice of our alternative vision for a democratic society. When we think of sustaining and increasing the influence of writing centers, writing programs, writing instruction on our campus, we need to do our best to understand the educational and political context in which we operate.

At Clemson during the past five years, as at Michigan Tech the seventeen years before that, I’ve found the best way to get started reading and understanding the local culture as well as to plan for change is with faculty workshops on writing across the curriculum. On many campuses, such
workshops are often sponsored by writing centers. At Clemson, we have conducted ten one-day, off-campus, introductory workshops for interdisciplinary groups of faculty. These workshops are completely voluntary, and thus far about 400 Clemson faculty (about 40 percent of our total faculty), representing fifty academic departments and all nine colleges have participated. In addition, we have conducted a similar number of follow-up workshops, open only to those who have attended an introductory workshop, on such topics as collaborative learning, oral communication across the curriculum, computer conferencing, gender and writing, as well as workshops in which faculty discuss with each other their recent classroom experiments. For example, in December 1991, over seventy of our WAC alumni turned out to hear and join discussions on how a horticulture teacher uses journals as a way of having students introduce themselves to Clemson’s botanical gardens, on how a physics teacher and his students find scientific inaccuracies in stories by Isaac Asimov and then rewrite the stories using the more scientifically accurate information, on how an agriculture teacher asks students to do research on campus problems (plantings, parking, bicycle paths, environmental concerns) and then write letters diagnosing problems and suggesting solutions to appropriate university authorities, and to hear reports from students in engineering and in business who participated in group projects in experimental sections that collaborated with and addressed audiences beyond the classroom—in one case, managers at NCR Corporation, and in another, instructors in engineering laboratories. From these experiences, as well as more traditional ones like serving on committees, conducting surveys, and listening to campus gossip, we (those of us who work at WAC) develop a reading of local culture, of faculty perceptions about their publish-or-perish lives, of their department’s commitment or lack of commitment to undergraduate teaching, of their concerns about new efforts to assess what they do, of their commitment to democratic values, of departmental and college rivalries, of how institutional change has occurred in the past on our campus, of their desire to experience more fully their role as teachers and to talk with supportive colleagues about their teaching and the changing contexts within which they teach.

Let me give you three examples of such workshop conversations, two from our campus and one from another.

At one Clemson workshop, we note the biology professor who volunteers that he really only learned to write when he wrote his thesis under the direction of a serious-minded mentor, a man who went over organization issues, presentation of data, audience and tone, transitions and punctuation, demanding to see revisions in substance as well as style. Later in the workshop day, this same professor explains that he never suggests that students go to the writing center, because if students get help, then he won’t be able to tell if students have done their own work and, therefore, he can’t be fair in grading
the reports of students, some of whom received extra help and some who did not. This prompts another professor to add that she doesn’t believe in giving opportunities for revising writing since she suspects most revisions are made by roommates, wives, boyfriends.

At a follow-up workshop, attended by fifty colleagues from various disciplines, an engineering professor recounts a recent teaching experience. He restructured a graduate course and taught it for the first time around principles he learned through the WAC workshop experience, focusing on collaborative group projects. He believes that the course was very successful, but he also mentioned that an official grievance was lodged against him by two international students in the course who believed he was not teaching them anything because he was expecting them to work independently. He had to defend his course design and pedagogy before a tribunal of three engineering professors, and he was happy to report to us that he had been exonerated. He may have been happy, and we were happy for him, but I also noticed the thoughtful silence that fell over the workshop participants as they considered his experience.

A participant from another institution tells several of us in her small workshop group that she was not as fortunate as my engineering colleague. An untenured assistant professor in English, she had not been concerned about her teaching evaluations. She had averaged about 4.5 on a 5.0 scale the previous three years. Last year, however, the department voted unanimously to do away with the number system, opting instead to use students’ prose evaluations, certainly a humanistic thing to do. Students wrote statements, as they had previously, such as “The best course I took this semester, although I didn’t particularly like not knowing my grades except at midterm and on the final” or “I really learned to write in this class; it was the first class I’ve ever taken in which the teacher didn’t teach but just helped us learn as we needed it.” But now the students could not recognize this teacher for excellence by circling a 4 or a 5 as they had on the old teacher evaluation form; these forms were now open to interpretation by a committee of senior professors, who told their junior colleague that her teaching was very much in need of improvement because some students complained of doing too much group work, of not receiving regular graded feedback, of not being taught—only “facilitated.” In addition, at her annual evaluation with her department head, he informed her that her publication record needed strengthening before her tenure decision, and that this same personnel committee recommended that she not pursue any more co-authored pieces, nor should she continue to publish on the subject of collaboration, which is, after all, a soft pedagogical topic. She should also avoid working on grants and writing projects with faculty in the School of Business because such activity promotes commercialism, or even worse, vocationalism. Since she was hired in composition studies, the committee recommended she single author publications on a
major figure in rhetoric, such as Kenneth Burke. They undoubtedly were unaware that Andrea Lunsford, among others, has suggested the "Burkean Parlor" as the theoretical model for all composition studies, and that "we need to embrace the idea of writing centers as Burkean Parlors, as centers for collaboration" (8). Members of this personnel committee do not attend CCCC; they do not read The Writing Center Journal. They see weakness and ineffectiveness where we see strength and innovation. Their attitude is reminiscent of Robert Martin's College English response that assumes collaboration in teaching or scholarly practice is an excuse for the lazy to get off easy.

And so we have work to do. We might begin with workshops, and we certainly need to work on several fronts at once: workshops, committees, newsletters, grants, reward systems, long-range planning, institutional reform, social and cultural change. But one essential place to begin is with individual classrooms across the curriculum. Faculty who have not had successful experiences with collaboration will always be reluctant to try it themselves, encourage it with students, or acknowledge its power when practiced by colleagues. For me, the way to begin in individual classrooms, including my own, is through collaboration with colleagues that I’ve met at WAC workshops. Conversations with faculty from disciplines as diverse as electrical engineering and philosophy, finance and forestry, chemistry and women’s studies, have led to student-centered collaborative projects that have promoted educational change in and out of our classrooms and throughout our campuses.

I'll conclude with some assumptions about collaboration that might be useful to those in writing centers as they theorize, teach, confer, tutor, conduct faculty workshops, and as they reflect on their educational and political purposes for teaching writing.

Collaboration helps teach students what we know how to do, not just what we know.¹

Much traditional pedagogy, first lecture then test, does not require application of knowledge. Collaborative pedagogy should combine knowledge—of writing and of the world—with opportunities to actually write for individual and social purposes that make a difference in the world. Learning to write to make a difference involves giving and taking and asking for feedback, revising a text, and being able to judge the aptness of our own prose. In a democratic society, learning to write also involves developing knowledge as well as an ongoing sense of commitment to social justice and to social action that can motivate and transform our experience of what knowledge and language can do for us and for others.

We should not use collaborative pedagogy because it is good for students who will someday have to work in teams on the job; rather, we must join with students to construct tasks that demand collaboration, tasks that can't be
Collaboration succeeds when every individual as well as the group as a whole succeeds.

In collaboration, the knowledge of the group needs to surpass that of any individual within it, without diminishing individual contributions. Individuals in collaborative projects need to hear their voices and to experience ownership of communal purpose and knowledge. Individuals also need to spend some time alone (or silently) thinking and writing.

Collaboration can help us translate between our personal language use and that of distant discourse communities. When we join with others to accomplish a task, we bring our existing understanding of the language necessary to complete the task successfully. But as we do further research, talk with others, and collaborate to effect change, often our language, our purpose, and our task change. We gain a deeper understanding of the discourse of our collaborators as well as the discourse community for which we are writing. Understanding diverse discourse communities is not just a matter of conventions or of interpretive communities but of empathy. As others have pointed out, often school is the only place where people are not allowed to help each other write a text, make meaning of a text, or otherwise act upon the world. Collaboration would change that.

Collaboration invites students to actively participate in teaching and learning.

As we work with students in writing centers and elsewhere, they must help us make meaning of collaborative activities—help us make visible what is often invisible in collaborative learning. Because we know that sometimes putting students in groups can do more harm than good, we therefore must involve students in effective assignment design. We should not develop collaborative writing assignments without student input, and we should not assign collaborative writing in which we ourselves are not eager to be full participants.

Academics have at least two responsibilities: 1) to develop disciplinary knowledge, and 2) to develop disciplinary talent (that is, those who will replace them one day). Consequently, students need educational experiences
that treat them as “professionals in training” rather than merely as “information processors” and regurgitators. Collaboration can provide such experiences.2

Collaboration does not function in the abstract.

All collaboration has political implications, and matters of gender, race, and class are important social factors in theorizing about our pedagogy. Do we use collaboration to help students succeed in the system, at GE, GM, IBM, the EPA, or the ACLU, to use familiar acronyms, or to help students become empowered to critique and transform the system through their participation from within or from without or some combination of the above? Should writing teachers and tutors teach students to write like us or to find their own voice or both or neither?

Collaboration changes classroom relationships in concrete ways. For example, as we collaborate with students, the traditional grading system has got to go (or at least bend, in the short term); if we agreed with Andrea Lunsford that we are subversive, this should not be a surprise. Writing center tutors have long understood the value of collaborative learning independent of systematic grading. We don’t give objective tests after every tutoring session or series of sessions to measure how well the student recalled the tutor’s words as the tutor wanted them recalled. If we must give tests in our classes, why not make them genuinely collaborative experiences? What would such a test look like? How would it be administered? How would it be graded and by whom?

Collaboration involves taking risks.

Teachers fear collaboration, students fear it, administrators fear it. We often know how a lecture will turn out—we are in control—especially if we’ve given that lecture on Melville with small variations every September for the past twenty years. We all agree that learners should take risks, that we all learn from such risk taking, whether they end in success, failure, or something in between. But our environments in the classroom for our students—and in our departments and colleges for ourselves—don’t really reward risk. The punishment for failure is very dramatic: an “F” on an assignment or a course, a negative tenure decision, a lost budget line, etc.

Collaboration is not only a subversive pedagogy, with its implied criticism of traditional methods of teaching, but it is an invitation into the way the world works, into the way people learn. But in educational settings, the invitation carries risks. In classrooms, the invitation is usually proffered by the powerful to the nearly powerless. In the case of writing centers, the invitation is usually proffered by the nearly powerless in non-essential, “auxiliary” programs (the perception of writing centers on most campuses) to the powerful in essential, “academic” departments and colleges.
As teachers and faculty members, we are in a double bind. If we design collaborative assignments that create independent learners, we can't be sure what those independent learners will do: how they will respond, whether they will choose to write on an appropriate subject, whether they will choose to write at all. On the other hand, there are personnel committees ready to pounce on the failures of teachers with experimental approaches, both the real failures and perceived failures. This double bind is not a condition of collaboration, but it is a condition of subversion. Proponents of the institutional practices being subverted will not like it. Democracy is based on dissent from business as usual in some fundamental way, and we cannot predict what will happen when voices from the margin become audible and empowered. That, of course, is the risk. I imagine each of us has been in such positions of subverting and of being subverted at the same time.

As writing program administrators, we are in a similar double bind. At Clemson, we cannot be sure what will come of the collaborative project to build a communication-intensive curriculum for finance majors sponsored jointly by our campus' WAC program, writing center, and Finance Department, but we can be sure whose campus reputation will be harmed if the project fails miserably, which administrative unit's very existence on campus may be threatened; it won't be the Department of Finance's.

So why take the risk? Because through our successful experiences during the past two decades, we are beginning to believe in the power of our alternative vision for education to empower our students and to promote democratic ideals, and because as a marginalized profession, we are learning more and more what successful collaboration is and what it means. Thus we too are beginning to feel the power—to believe that we can make an important difference. The current climate of educational reform, even with the highly visible but misguided agenda of national standardized testing, tracking, basic skills, and the privileging of European culture, nevertheless offers opportunities for educational and cultural renewal based more fully on democratic, multicultural, inclusive values. More than most academic programs, writing centers have always sought to reach out and include diverse student populations in their campus' educational experience, and they have usually done so in ways that acknowledge and respect students' differences as independent learners and in ways that deny they are all similar empty glasses to be filled with a received elixir concocted by their teachers. Writing centers have sought and will continue to seek ways to collaborate with academic units across the disciplines to subvert the notion that the best way educationally to imagine a democratic future is by reinforcing the hierarchical distinctions of the past as manifested in society, in education, and in teaching practices. We know that when we work together with people to help them become writers, we also help them risk making a difference.
Notes

1 I am indebted to James Reither for this wording and for my discussion of this point; see "Some Ideas of Michael Polanyi and Some Implications for Teaching Writing," PRE/TEXT, Volume 2, 1981: 33-41.

2 Barbara E. Walvoord and Lucille P. McCarthy discuss the concept of "professional in training" in their book Thinking and Writing in College: A Naturalistic Study of Students in Four Disciplines, NCTE, 1991.

3 I would like to thank the following colleagues for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay: Chris Benson, Beth Daniell, Carl Lovitt, and Ann Young.

Works Cited


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