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## Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)

*Carol Severino*

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In our teaching and research in writing centers and classrooms, we need to identify and rhetorically analyze “collaboration” in its multiple forms. When we overuse this catch-all term to mean *any* kind of mutual help or working together, we not only demonstrate what Frederick Erickson calls our current “crush on collaboration” (431), but we also confuse people inside and outside the profession. When “collaboration” is bantered about in education, business, and politics, it is unabashedly unmodified, unclassified, demonstrating by its nakedness that it serves too many purposes and has too many referents, not to mention the historical ones such as Benedict Arnold and Vidkun Quisling who “collaborated” with the enemy. As Andrea Lunsford notes, “. . . collaboration is hardly a monolith. Instead, it comes in a dizzying variety of modes about which we know almost nothing” (7).

Just as composition research has demonstrated that there exists no one individual writing *process*, but writing processes that vary by purpose, audience, task, (Selzer 279-281) and writer’s personality (Jensen and DiTiberio 286-288), writing center research suggests that there is no one kind of collaboration, but *collaborations*, whose structures depend on the same features of situational and interpersonal dynamics as do the various writing processes. Hence, the ambiguity and confusion caused by the “crush on collaboration” demand that we use rhetorical variables to describe “collaborations” but without creating reductive stereotypes or rigid dichotomies. Ede and Lunsford caution against such oversimplified interpretations of collaboration when they make a distinction between “hierarchical” and “dialogic” collaboration, terms which parallel “directive” and “non-directive,” but are even more suggestive of power dynamics. Hierarchical collaboration, they

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observe, is when one party may have more power, authority, and influence than the other, whereas dialogic collaboration is when both parties are usually more balanced in status, writing activity, and contributions toward the product. While hierarchical collaboration stresses efficiency in producing a product, important in business and industry, dialogic collaboration stresses the play of the process as much or more so than the product, important in “reformed” educational settings (133-136). As I will show, to a certain extent, how much we value process/play or product/efficiency will influence not only our collaborative styles, but also how we evaluate collaborative sessions.

Applying hierarchical and dialogic collaborations to writing centers, especially peer-tutoring centers, can help us roughly sketch out the forms of collaboration in peer tutoring, but a more fine-grained rhetorical analysis, as I will illustrate, will result in richer and more precise descriptions and avoid hardbound categories and stereotypes.

We can begin the discussion of collaboration in the peer writing center with the following problem-posing questions: Since peer implies more or less equal partner, would most peer sessions then be dialogic? Or, as John Trimbur asks, is “peer tutoring” a contradiction in terms (23)? Is there possibly no such thing as a true peer, since no two individuals are alike, and factors such as gender, race, class, age, and personality (as I will later show) affect the dynamics of the relationship and, therefore, what happens in a tutoring session? And if true peers are hard to find, does it follow, as Irene Clark asserts, that true collaboration (which she suggests is a relationship in which writers are not afraid to tell each other what they think about each other’s work) is hard to find (10)? If peer tutoring, says Kenneth Bruffee, is a conversation (635), does one party sometimes dominate, control, or monopolize the conversation? If peer tutoring, as Ann Matsushashi Feldman says, is a negotiation, is one party a better negotiator than the other? And who determines which and how rhetorical or grammatical issues are negotiated—the tutor, the student or both, with varying proportions of decision-making responsibility? To paraphrase George Orwell in *Animal Farm*, is it that all peers are equal, but some peers are more equal than others?

Questions about the interpersonal dynamics between so-called peers, related to conflicts between tutoring roles (Healy 42) and between forces of language (Gillam 3-4), were those I was asking when I studied two videotaped tutoring sessions of the same student with two different tutors. Two sessions with the same student and two different tutors provided an interesting contrast, enabling me to focus on the collaborative style of the tutors and the interpersonal dynamics of the two pairs in two “rhetorical situations” (Bitzer). Studying these two particular sessions and other videotaped tutoring sessions and their written transcripts has helped me inductively identify key features of situational and interpersonal dynamics that affect the nature of collaboration. These rhetorical features, listed below, can help us make the gross distinction of how hierarchical and directive or how dialogic

and non-directive the collaboration is and whether the scales of the balance of power are tipped in favor of the tutor, as is often the case, or the student, as is sometimes the case. In other words, how much of a tutor and how much of a peer is the peer tutor (Garret 94)? But more importantly, in addition to providing insights about these gross distinctions, which as Lunsford says, “perch only at the tip of the collaborative iceberg” (7), features of interpersonal relationships also help us make the fine distinctions necessary for full descriptions of tutoring and writing conference sessions as well as of writer/respondent relationships in general. A chart of these features appears on page 56. The ability to describe rhetorically the richness and variation in collaborative processes will improve our research and tutor training in writing centers.

### Two “Collaborations”: Same Student, Different Tutor

In terms of features from the chart, training and age are the salient features that distinguish the tutor in the first session from the tutor in the second session which occurred a week later. The sessions took place in a peer writing center, but in the first session, the so-called “peer,” whom we will call Henry, is a high school teacher pursuing his masters in English. Henry is older than the average peer—in his thirties—but so is the student Joe, an older African American freshman who has served in the army. Eddy, the tutor in the second session, is a freshman with less experience as a writer and a teacher/tutor than Henry. He is younger than Joe and, as we’ll see, indicates that he is just as burdened by writing as Joe is, thus expressing a certain peer solidarity with him. The writing center itself, a drop-in center which serves both undergraduate and graduates, belongs to the English Department at a large state commuter university in a large cosmopolitan midwestern city. The University serves such a large multi-ethnic, multi-racial population that faculty and students call it “U.N.U.” or “United Nations University.” In a composition class of twenty students, conceivably up to twenty different ethnic groups can be represented. Because of the diversity of the student body and the problems of racism in the city and society, one of the optional themes addressed in first-year composition through reading and writing assignments in an in-house reader is “Race and Ethnicity in Our Families and Lives.” Joe comes to the center for help with two assignments from this race and ethnicity sequence.

In the first session, Joe arrives at the writing center in the process of working on his first draft of the first assignment in the sequence—what race and ethnicity mean to him, and how his attitudes toward different races have developed. Obviously, he knows more about this personal experience topic than his tutor, thus increasing the chances for a more equal exchange between them. Joe brings in part of a draft which the tutor reads—a story of being chased off the baseball field by a group of whites with baseball bats. He tells

### **Features for Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)**

1. Age(s) of writer and respondent
2. Gender(s) of writer and respondent
3. Ethnic background(s) of writer and respondent
4. Language background(s) of writer and respondent (e.g. writer or respondent is non-native English speaker)
5. Personality characteristics of writer and respondent (extraverted, introverted, aggressive, passive)
6. Writing and tutoring experience, training, and pedagogical strategies of respondent
7. Status of respondent compared to writer and whether he/she has power over the writer (e.g. a grade, a promotion)
8. Experience and attitude of writer toward writing (e.g. little or much school or home writing and reading experience, high or low writing apprehension)
9. Motivation of writer to come to session (voluntary, recommended, or mandatory session)
10. Length of time and frequency writer and respondent have worked with one another
11. State of the text brought in as perceived by writer (work in progress, partial draft, first draft, completed paper)
12. State of the text brought in as perceived by respondent, as well as what respondent does with that text (reads it aloud, reads silently, sets it aside, has writer read it aloud)
13. How the conference goals and agenda are decided (by writer, by respondent, by both, by writer's classroom teacher, by supervisor)
14. Writer's and respondent's knowledge of paper topic.
15. Level of discourse addressed (ideas, organization, phrasing, syntax, mechanics)
16. Length of contributions to discussion (number of words and number of sentences each speaks)
17. Rhetorical functions of contributions to discussion (leading questions, open-ended questions, complaints, appeals)
18. Body language, positioning, and style of dialoguing.

Henry, who is white and from one of the city's segregated white neighborhoods, that besides telling the story of being chased, he wants to relate all the experiences that he as a black man from the west-side ghetto has had with various ethnic groups and sub-groups within those groups. Joe and Henry negotiate what groups to focus on, but in terms of balance of power, Henry has the upper hand in the negotiations. Aware that Joe has an abundance of material about conflicts between blacks and other ethnic groups and afraid Joe will lose control over the paper which needs to be only two to three pages long, Henry wants Joe to limit the scope of the paper and focus on one ethnic group. He tells him as much by asking Joe two closed and "leading" questions (italicized in the text). In other words, Henry has a particular answer in mind when he asks Joe first what he thinks "the paper could become too much of" and second, whether the paper will focus on the white race.

Henry: As you point out, one of the things you want to use is the personal example, as far as leading in to your point and idea. What I thought was really interesting was when you get to this part right here, dealing with the experience of the street here. The thing you have to, what do you think you have to keep in mind as far as the focus of the paper? The focus becomes what? What's the focus of the paper as we go back to what the topic is about here?

Joe: The focus is basically race and ethnicity.

Henry: So your position, your attitudes that you have towards that, right? What do you think could possibly happen here as you begin to use the example? *What could the paper become too much of is what I'm trying to . . .*

Joe: It could become um too much of a story.

Henry: Right, right. You see I think what maybe would help here, what maybe is not a bad idea, is to keep the example and use it because I think you really develop and what you're doing is that you're hitting it home as far as how it is that this example becomes maybe all-encompassing of how it shapes your views and your ideas as far as your attitude towards a particular race. *Now is your attitude shaped let's say toward the white race, for example? Is that what it's going to center on?*

Because of Henry's directive persuasion, they decide to focus only on the white group and on its racist and tolerant sub-groups. In addition, Henry encourages Joe to take a truly historical perspective in following the assignment—to trace the development of his attitudes toward whites from his father's experiences in the segregated South, through Joe's experience in the

ghetto and in the army to moving to an all-white neighborhood and getting chased. The exchange that follows the one above shows another facet of Henry's directedness. Note the italicized prescriptive phrases:

Henry: You see, *the thing you have to keep in mind*, too, if you're working within a limitation, you know, is that you don't have to touch on every culture. So I think you *what you need to look at* is to set up a scheme or whatever of what culture you would want to look at as far as how your attitude or your opinions of that culture have been shaped or how they have been brought about or developed or what have you, and *I think one of the things you maybe want to start out with* is the idea of what specifically will you look at, and I think that what maybe that does is then give the paper some focus.

Joe: Right.

Henry: So that if we were to start, let's leave the example for a moment, we'll come back to that. What particular groups would you want to start, what right away, the first group you'd want to deal as far as your attitude toward that group has been shaped or formed.

Joe: The white group.

Henry: O.K., so first the white race, the white group, and then what would be the next group then?

Joe: After the white group I would want to go to um I'm in between on the Mexicans and the uh Jews, but I'd like to talk about the white culture groups first.

Henry: O.K., well I think what you're doing is at least it's giving you a rough shape, as far as what specifically to concentrate on. I think what you may run into a problem here is not the lack of information, you may have a lot of information. *What you really gotta do* is really center in on so you know, let's do this for a second. What is the main idea you'd want to work with as far as the, let's say, the white group alone.

In the second session Joe, the same writer, comes to the center a week later. He is in a different state of mind, a higher state of apprehension about his writing. In the week that transpired, he has gotten back a paper (not the paper worked on with Henry) from his composition teacher with comments that he perceives disparage his writing, maybe even himself, and possibly his race. These comments, which he shows to Eddy in the course of the one-and-a-half-hour session, have made him almost obsessive about the precision of his phrasing and his transitions. The comments also make him speculate that

first-year composition may be included as one of his discrimination experiences. Because of the comments, Joe is very concerned about his transitions and thinks that, as he calls it, “transitting” from one idea to the next is one of his major problems. As important as this “transitting” problem is to him, however, is the rhetorical problem of making his paper compelling to himself and to an audience.

After eliciting Joe’s goals for the paper, Eddy makes no attempt to change them and works with the text that Joe brings in. The theme of this paper again is “ethnicity,” but this assignment requires Joe to interview someone from another culture about his/her experience with ethnicity and prejudice. Joe has chosen a female Mexican student who, much to his surprise, claims not to have experienced blatant discrimination by whites, but she does relate some subtle forms of racism she has felt. Joe is having difficulty telling her story on paper for many reasons. First, her experiences are so different from his that he doesn’t quite believe them. He’s also having the same problems as any journalist who writes oral histories. Whose words should he use, hers or his? He says he wants to word the story to make it “compelling,” but his interviewee in his mind has failed to provide him with the kind of compelling material that he had for his first essay, so he feels he has to compensate through more powerful phrasing. Joe also wants to avoid the teacher’s red pen. Unlike the first session, this second session is influenced more heavily by Joe’s apprehension about the teacher and his faithfulness to the interviewee and her story. Both outside parties, the teacher and the interviewee lurk in the background affecting the session and the text, although physically they are not present. The following excerpt is the beginning of the session in which Joe reads his paper to Eddy. They decide to keep the text brought in and work on phrasing, using more interpretation of the interviewee’s words and fewer direct quotes from her to make the story more compelling. Often it is the first few minutes of a session, especially the interactional style of the tutor, influenced by personality and pedagogy, that set the stage and determine the structure and balance of the remainder of the session.

Eddy: [After Joe has explained the interview assignment to him] How do you feel for, how do you feel with this? What did you want to do with it? Did you want to see about organization or something?

Joe: I wanted to make this more compelling actually, but the things that she told me, they’re kinda subtle. It’s just not, it’s not really compelling, you know.

Eddy: Oh, really.

Joe: Yeah, but I read a story by Alice Walker. She told a story that wasn’t compelling either, yet there it is in the book.



- Eddy: It's published right. Just because it's published doesn't mean it's better.
- Joe: Right, you know. So I mean, it isn't as interesting as others, you know, yet she still have some, you know.
- Eddy: You just deal, deal with what you have. You couldn't get her to get into anything personal, huh?
- Joe: I tried, but she insists that her life has been smooth sailin'. Maybe it has.
- Eddy: Good then, right? O.K., let's see what you have so far.
- Joe: All right. These two pages.
- Eddy: Do you want to read it to me?

The contrasts between the opening of Eddy's session and the opening of Henry's are clear and numerous. Eddy asks Joe what his goals are, whereas Henry tells Joe what his goals should be. Eddy has Joe read his paper aloud, thus affirming his text produced so far ("You just deal with what you have"), whereas Henry reads it to himself and then sets it aside and works with Joe to create new text. In Henry's opening, he has most of the lines, whereas Eddy and Joe share the lines which are short and repartee-style. Eddy's informal language, the "or something," the "huh," and agreeing with Joe that first, just because something is published, it doesn't mean it's interesting, and second, the text he brought in was probably not that boring, shows his peer identification with Joe as do his comments about Rosa, the interviewee. ("You couldn't get her to say anything personal, huh?") He also agrees with Joe that Rosa's experiences with race have been either repressed by her or simply dull and unrepresentative. When Joe is reading from the middle of his interview paper here, Eddy's response to Rosa's account suggests that the two males, one white and one black, also share common perceptions about the differences between young men's and young women's experiences in the city. Such common perceptions also make them more peerlike in their interactions:

- Joe: [Reading from his paper] Rosa says she has lots of experience with different cultures and being of Spanish roots hasn't been a hindrance. [Quoting Rosa] "I work with many white people and I get treated as good as the next person. My experience with this predominant culture of white people has been great. I personally have never experienced any discrimination from them, nor have I ever been the scapegoat for a bunch of racial jokes." [Joe looks up at Eddy for a response]

Eddy: Pretty good life.

Joe: I'm telling you! I mean...

Eddy: Does she get out?

Joe: Well, she did, you know she gets out, but uh I guess girls are pretty right? I should have picked a guy, huh?

Eddy: I think you, maybe a gang member or something.

Later Eddy again identifies with Joe's experiences by admitting that equally burdened as Joe by writing assignments, he, too, was up until two o'clock, the night before.

Joe: So now this right here (pointing to a phrase in the text) is just something I put there out of tiredness.

Eddy: Were you up until 2:00 last night?

Joe: Yeah.

Eddy: Were you really? I was up that late too.

Joe: Were you?

Eddy: I was doing some, I was writing.

In terms of number of sentences in the entire session, Eddy says very little compared to Henry, even when Joe asks his opinion. Most of the sentences in the transcription of the Joe-Eddy session belong to Joe since these are the sentences of the paper he is reading aloud. It is possible that Eddy is not entirely comfortable in the role that Joe casts him in as he reads the paper—co-worrier or phrasing-supervisor, sort of a linguistic super-ego. In terms of body language, Eddy does fidget quite a bit. With Eddy, Joe seems to call the shots and have more say-so over what happens in the session and to his text. The scale of power seems to be tipped in Joe's direction, whereas in the first session, they are more tipped in Henry's direction, although Joe provides all the story material that Henry helps shape.

Not all the features listed earlier on the chart influence the structure and symmetry of every tutoring session, and we should not be seduced into predicting that the way the first five demographic features operate reflects traditional, stereotyped power relationships in the society at large. Otherwise, we would automatically assume that a tutoring session between an older, male, white, extraverted native speaker and a younger, female, non-white, introverted non-native speaker would always be hierarchical, directive, and asymmetrical with the former dominating the latter. In such a case, we would be assuming that the tutor either consciously or subconsciously

subscribes to the “banking method of education” that Freire argues against, in favor of the problem-posing dialogic method (57-74). Top-down assumptions about tutoring can be offset by training if the tutor has been taught that his or her epistemological stance should be to elicit the student’s knowledge—the expressivist view of writing center pedagogy—or if his or her stance is that both parties make a contribution to knowledge, the social epistemic view of writing center pedagogy (Lunsford). A potentially tutor-dominated session could also be offset by the experience and attitude toward writing of the female, non-native English-speaking writer, for example, if she has a secure sense of herself as a writer and came voluntarily, not forcibly, to the center for audience feedback on her writing. Gender interacts with the other rhetorical variables in ways that we must be sensitive to in our tutoring, training, and research. The conclusions that can be drawn from this particular study are limited because all three writers were male.

The variable of motivation for coming to the center is likewise important. As we know from experience, if a student is sent by her classroom teacher, she may at first see the tutor as a substitute or stand-in for the teacher, making for top-down collaboration at least at first, with the student playing the submissive role of student, perhaps even wronged, alienated, or humiliated student. Or again, depending on her personality interacting with motivation, she could also strongly direct the session toward the issues her teacher has identified, problems which she perceives, if solved, would improve her grade and status in the class. The state of the text brought in as both the writer and the respondent perceive it also determines the balance of activity. Probably, the more the writer sees her text as a work in progress, one of multiple drafts, the more likely there will be a balance of activity in the session, for the writer will be less defensive about a text in which she is not heavily invested and thus more open to the tutor’s suggestions. Level of discourse addressed in the session is also important. When the participants put aside the local issues of text, when physically they stop looking at the student’s paper, put down their pens, and start looking at each other and conversing about global, rhetorical issues, the chance for a more equal exchange is liable to increase. Rhetorical tasks such as imagining effects of a passage on a reader and whole discourse tasks such as generating ideas for a paper might make for a more balanced exchange than more linguistic tasks such as wording passages or connecting one idea to the next.

Using these features of situational and interpersonal dynamics raises a number of questions: We can see that Henry and Joe collaborate differently than Eddy and Joe, but is one session a *better* collaboration than the other? And what criteria do we use to judge one session better than the other? How much do we weigh the efficiency of producing a product, important in hierarchical collaboration, against the play of the process important in dialogic collaboration?

Such debates about the evaluation of collaborative sessions invite further discussion and research. Having tutors in training view, analyze, and discuss videotapes and transcripts such as these, guided by the “Features for Rhetorically Analyzing Collaboration(s)” can educate them about their options for epistemological stances. Using the features on the chart to analyze collaborative sessions can help tutors become versatile and sensitive enough to students and their situations to sense when to enter and leave directive/hierarchical and non-directive/dialogic modes, even with the same student in the same tutoring session (Reigstad and McAndrew 28). As Lunsford notes, writing centers should be well versed at using both the hierarchical and dialogic modes of collaboration (7).

Knowing the results of research on composing processes, we could never teach only one composing process. The prescriptions “Always freewrite first” or “Always revise” are too rigid in light of what we know of the diversity of composing processes that vary by task, situation, and personality. In our research, teaching, and tutoring, we must also use these situational and interpersonal features to describe and analyze richly and rhetorically the variety of collaboration(s).

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