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Bruffee and the CUNY Circle

by Richard Sterling

In the early 1970s the City University of New York (CUNY) introduced a new policy of Open Admissions to all graduates from the high schools of New York City. CUNY, which had operated a fairly selective system, suddenly opened its doors to thousands of students, many of whom were unprepared for college-level work. The task of preparing these students fell most often to English department faculty and to newly hired instructors placed in writing departments or special remedial sections within the English department. This upheaval began to have a huge impact in colleges across the city. It also gave rise to an unprecedented era of collaboration, research, and innovation.

To understand the influence of Ken Bruffee and the “CUNY circle” within this tumultuous period, we must begin with two important architects of these enormous changes. The first is Mina Shaughnessy, who was the director of Basic Writing at City College of New York (CCNY), and whose important book, *Errors and Expectations*, based on her experiences teaching writing during Open Admissions, continues to influence the field today. The second is Harvey Weiner, then a professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, whose brainchild, the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (CAWS), became an organizing force for the teaching of writing at CUNY. Ken Bruffee’s influence begins with the publication

About the Author

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of his book in 1972, *A Short Course in Writing*, and his ideas began to be known as CAWS developed and expanded its network.

It was Mina Shaughnessy who first brought together a small group of faculty from across CUNY campuses to discuss their writing programs and the impact of open admissions on those writing programs. These informal meetings gathered information on where and in which departments writing programs were placed, what testing and placement mechanisms were used, and who was teaching in these programs. This “Shaughnessy Circle,” as it was sometimes called, became the venue for early discussions about the theory and content of the writing programs, and it was here that Ken Bruffee, Bob Lyons (then a professor of English at Queens College), and Donald McQuade (also professor of English at Queens College) became friends and colleagues, exchanging ideas, strategies and program information that was to shape writing programs across CUNY. At almost the same time, Harvey Weiner independently began to contact directors of writing programs across CUNY. Although not part of the Shaughnessy group, as the meetings evolved and some of the same people were attending both meetings, the groups were consolidated and CAWS essentially became the organizing structure.

I conducted interviews with Robert Lyons, Donald McQuade and Harvey Weiner to add to my own knowledge of Ken Bruffee’s work and early influence on CUNY faculty. Lyons recalled Ken’s quiet manner, his firm assertions and his unerring stance on principals of learning: “Ken loved to debate, particularly about the new students at CUNY. He was a gadfly in his own department at Brooklyn College, and felt that Mina’s group offered him a chance to work through problems with people who supported the principals of Open Admissions at CUNY.” Lyons went on to say that “[a]s soon as one met Ken, one knew he was a person of great integrity. He would quietly insist that you simply had to read this article in anthropology or philosophy or sociology if you were to understand how to help these new students be successful in a university setting.”

Don McQuade also met Ken Bruffee through these early gatherings, and remembers him as a person dedicated to understanding these new CUNY students and who went so far as to take courses in the School of Social Work at Columbia University in order to get a more complete understanding of social class, race and ethnicity as these contexts affected a student’s ability to negotiate the academic discourse. McQuade remembers Bruffee as a “serious intellectual, who engaged in vigorous discussions about social class and the culture of the working class students who were now to be found throughout CUNY.” McQuade reports that “the English Department at Queens was profoundly affected by Bruffee’s work, partic-

ularly his principles of collaborative learning.” He said that Bruffee would spend significant time with friends and colleagues helping them to put structures together that would allow these principles to fit within traditional course work.

Harvey Weiner remembers those early meetings with Ken Bruffee while he was still an adjunct faculty teaching courses at a number of CUNY colleges. Weiner also recalls how Ken Bruffee began to assert a quiet leadership that would lead beyond CUNY to the profession across the nation: “Following discussions at CAWS, Ken wrote to the Program Chair at the MLA and asked for a session at their annual conference. This was a first! The session was hugely oversubscribed, and that event led to discussions for creating a national audience for the teaching of writing at the college level. From this meeting the discussions that led to the WPA [Council of Writing Program Administrators] began.” Harvey Weiner also describes Bruffee’s influence as fundamental to his own teaching and research: “I have adopted collaborative learning in my teaching from the earliest days, and you can find these strategies and approaches in all my books on the teaching of writing. Ken Bruffee has had a profound effect on my professional life.”

As Mina Shaughnessy’s group and CAWS merged, additional faculty joined, and Mina became the director of a new office called the Instructional Resource Center. Mina asked CAWS members to take on various research tasks and the development of written guidelines that eventually grew into a CUNY policy on writing.

I met Ken Bruffee while working with Sondra Perl and John Brereton collecting data to document the practices and content of writing programs at the various campuses. These data included writing tests and other skills tests, as well as curricula and pedagogical approaches. We interviewed faculty, observed classes and collected materials. Through our research we learned that Brooklyn College was doing something unique. Their writing program included a peer tutoring component that Ken Bruffee designed and implemented. We visited Brooklyn College to collect information about Ken’s program, and it was there that I first saw components of Ken’s “Brooklyn Plan” involving peer tutoring and collaborative learning principles outlined in *A Short Course in Writing*.

One additional task that I had taken on allowed me to witness the growing influence of Ken Bruffee’s work. I had become treasurer for CAWS, and we held a yearly conference at the old Roosevelt mansion on the east side of Manhattan. Sessions in peer tutoring were a regular feature of these conferences. As a result, writing programs began offering sections of peer tutoring on many campuses. Many were courses that upper-level undergraduates could take. During the course, students worked one on one with students in need of assistance, or, as was the case on many

campuses, worked in writing centers set up to help students with various writing assignments that arose from courses they were taking.

At Lehman College, I was given the task of setting up a writing center and staffing it in the summer of 1973. Staffing was accomplished through a federal program known as CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). I worked with a team of about ten staff, all of whom were recent college graduates. During the summer we worked to prepare materials for the coming semester. We used Ken Bruffee's *Short Course in Writing* as our text, and designed the training of our staff using these approaches. It is difficult to explain how revolutionary this book was to us when we began our writing center. Traditionally tutors would read and correct student papers, explain their mistakes and attempt to get the students to rewrite their papers. For very many, these methods did not work well at all as the correction of papers did not uncover the underlying reason for the mistakes. What was revolutionary about Bruffee's book was the rethinking of the roles of the teacher, mentor and tutor.

Collaboration, learning as a social construct, providing an audience and purpose for writing were new ideas. And our implementation of these ideas was uncertain, and often perfunctory. What we did was use each other as models for the work to begin with undergraduates in the fall. We wrote papers, we worked in small groups each following Bruffee's strategies: writing from your own experience, free writing, asking questions, speculating; all were not merely allowed, but promoted. Writing flowed and was remarkably liberating, and many of us expressed astonishment at the ease with which we were writing as well as the volume that poured forth. Following these drafts, we then met to discuss the pieces. Again, instead of providing a standard critique, we became a supportive inquiring audience for the work in progress, asking questions, suggesting clarification, while all the time checking with the author to see if that was his or her intent. With meaning made clear to the satisfaction of the audience, the revision process moved toward standard editing functions. Our summer preparation turned out to be enjoyable and instructive. Many spoke of an awakening of an urge to write.

That fall our writing center opened, and students began to arrive. We had a staff of seven, each armed with a copy of Bruffee's book. The term was frantic, exhilarating and partially successful. Many students came wanting specific help on specific papers. They were impatient with the process, they were dealing with assigned topics, and our staff had to respond to those needs. Few of the students were in classrooms where instructors were using approaches aligned with our staff's new philosophy. I was teaching two sections of basic writing and for the first time using

Bruffee's book in my class, but even here I discovered that the range of demands being made simultaneously on students were in direct opposition to the methods I wished to use to get our students excited about the act of writing itself. Pressures in these early days led to a significant watering down of the work of the writing center and turned much of our work in more utilitarian directions. We taught grammar, we corrected papers and we probably did a fair amount of re-writing the papers ourselves. Toward the end of that first year, many of the CETA staff members left to take regular jobs; and so, returning to Bruffee's book, I designed and received approval for a course called "peer tutoring." Following Bruffee's structure, I designed the course to include training for the first three weeks of the course, then tutoring sessions with small groups of students including some one-on-one tutoring, and finally, meetings with the whole group once a week. This time we were more successful. The tutors enjoyed the more social aspects of this kind of collaboration. They enjoyed the new, more equal collaboration with students, and they discovered that they were learning a great deal about their own knowledge. The course was a success, and its reputation grew. The second term the course was over-subscribed, and we could select students from a larger pool. This selection led, in turn, to greater success both for tutors and their tutees.

The experience at Lehman College led to regular sections of peer tutoring, the establishment of a writing center that used Bruffee's book as its central philosophy, and a growing awareness of the importance of collaboration in the learning process. Across CUNY writing programs, a similar pattern emerged, though from time to time there was opposition from people who believed that peer tutoring was an inefficient way to assist struggling writers. Once again, Bruffee took up this challenge. Following his attendance at a course in epistemology at the New School, Bruffee argued that "if knowledge is constructed by the discursive practices of communities of people and learning thereby involves joining new communities, then we can stop worrying about the blind leading the blind." ("Preface" xxvi)

It is always difficult to attempt to sum up an individual's impact on an institution as enormous as CUNY. But the extraordinary events of the early 1970s brought together faculty in relatively small groups from across the university to tackle the emerging problems associated with Open Admissions. This far-smaller group of faculty came to know each other well over the next ten years. They in turn came to represent the entry point for the thousands of first-generation, first-year students. Thus, it was not only possible but probable that, with the prescience of leaders like Mina Shaughnessy, who brought together, powerful, thoughtful people like Ken Bruffee, his new compelling ideas in peer tutoring and collaborative learning were

able to reach widely and deeply across the CUNY community. Ken Bruffee's work, his thinking and his persistence through opposition resulted in his being a significant force for good in the lives of teachers of writing, and for the college students who discovered that they could become successful learners—many, for the first time in their lives.

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