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Innovation and Repetition: The Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors 25 Years Later

by Harvey Kail

In the winter of 1979 I read an announcement in a new publication, The Writing Lab Newsletter, calling for applications for fellowships in the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors. The name struck me as so odd at the time that I had to read it twice: the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors. It doesn’t sound very literary, I thought at the time, or intellectual, the way “Institutes” are supposed to sound. I had just been appointed an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Maine to develop a writing lab. The only problem was that I had no idea how to develop a writing lab. Despite the year I had spent co-directing a writing lab in a rural community college deep in the cornfields of Illinois, I didn’t really have a clue about what might make sense in the long term. And, naturally, I had the budget and institutional authority to match—zero. Perhaps, I thought as I read the announcement over yet again—trying to say all the words exactly as they were written—peer tutoring was something that I could do in the writing center at my institution. I sent for the application.

That next summer, I went to New York City for five weeks as a Fellow of the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors. I got a good deal. The Institute provided housing and a stipend, and my home institution provided some living expenses. More important, as I was to come to understand later, I also came to New York with an agreement that once I had completed the Institute, my institution was committed to establishing a suitable, credit-bearing peer tutor training course. When I came back to my campus something had to happen.

Now, some twenty-five years later, it seems like an opportune moment to ask what the Institute has made possible for me and for the other Fellows over this long

About the Author

Harvey Kail is Professor of English and Writing Center Coordinator at the University of Maine. His work with peer tutors has been recognized by the Maxwell Award for Leadership in Collaborative Learning in 2004 and the Outstanding Teacher award from the University of Maine college of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2008.
period of time. What did we take with us? What did we find valuable over time? By way of answering these and other self-inflicted questions, I designed a survey for the purpose and sent it to as many former Brooklyn Institute Fellows as I could contact to ask them systematically about their experience. Sixteen of the seventeen Fellows I reached responded to the survey, a return rate significant in itself.

As a means of making some context for the results of my survey, I’d like first to describe the Brooklyn Institute’s origins, structure, and pedagogy, and say something about the experience of being one of its Fellows. Then, I’ll turn to the ways the Institute has influenced former Fellows over the course of the last 25 years.

Based upon his home-made and award-winning peer tutoring program in the Writing Center at Brooklyn College of the 1970’s, Bruffee wrote a dissemination grant to the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) aimed at transplanting the “Brooklyn Plan” to other universities and colleges in the New York City area and beyond, in the hope that peer tutoring in writing might bloom into a national model.

The original FIPSE grant funded two consecutive summer institutes with fifteen Fellows in each, beginning in the summer of 1980 and repeating itself in the summer of 1981. The Institute’s work was carried out at the CUNY Graduate Center on 42nd Street, just around the corner from the New York Public Library. Kenneth Bruffee was the director, and he and Alex Gitterman, Professor of Social Work at Columbia University, were the faculty. Marcia Silver, then the writing center director at Brooklyn College, managed the numerous logistics and details of the enterprise that engaged eighteen people for five weeks in the heart of New York City.

The “Fellows” consisted of faculty and writing center directors from research universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges around the country. To build a bridge between the two different summer groups, a few Fellows from the first year joined the 1981 group for the final week of their five-week residency and then a core group returned to New York for a “consolidation seminar” in the summer of 1983. The Institute housed out-of-town Fellows in one of NYU’s Washington Square dormitories, and the Fellows’ home institutions agreed to supply money for expenses and to establish some form of credit-bearing course through which to train undergraduate students as peer writing tutors.

The curriculum was the same for each of the first two summers: a seminar in the mornings with Kenneth Bruffee on the collaborative learning model he had developed for peer tutor training, and afternoon sessions twice a week with social work professor Alex Gitterman, who focused us on the inner workings of mutual aid groups. Every weekday we would meet at nine in the morning in a windowless
classroom in the CUNY graduate center where, until noon, we would act as if we were students in Bruffee's peer tutor training course at Brooklyn College. For his part, he convincingly pretended to be Professor Kenneth A. Bruffee. He assigned homework from his textbook, *A Short Course in Writing*, and imposed deadlines. He kept time while we worked our way through the small group tasks he assigned us and then left us alone to accomplish together. He audaciously marked up our papers: “bifurcated proposition,” he would write in the margins, or “what is reason number two?” For our part, we forgot we were pretending and became his students.

On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, we met with Alex Gitterman to study “small group dynamics.” During these afternoon sessions, he would walk us through the models of group development we were reading about in the literature, and he would demonstrate with us the behaviors that a group might experience as it struggles through the issues that it must successfully deal with to become genuinely useful to its individual members. We were getting to know that struggle intimately. We were strangers to each other but living in the intimacy of a small group. We met and worked intensely every day for five weeks, reading and commenting daily on each other’s writing. Most of us were living two to a room in an NYU dorm, well outside our usual accommodation in every sense of the word, surrounded by the intensity of New York City and the exhilaration of learning things about writing and about teaching writing that felt very new to us and unsettling. The life of the group took on a meta-life of its own.

In fact, we were experiencing as a group the very tensions and triumphs that Alex Gitterman was describing to us from the social work literature. The twice-weekly afternoon sessions became a means of furthering our understanding of our own development as a mutual aid group and the issues of intimacy and authority that had predictably, as it turns out, arrived and asserted themselves among us. Gitterman brought a social worker’s training and experience to the idea of students helping each other become better writers, complementing and clarifying the work we were doing in the morning seminar linking collaborative learning and teaching writing. Alex seemed to know what we were going to do as a group before we did it. As John Trimbur notes in his survey, “Guy is brilliant. I’ll never know whether he scripted it all or it just happened.”

We spent our remaining afternoons and many evenings and weekends writing argument papers to fit the *Short Course* forms that Bruffee insisted on, in spite of the opposition that we soon mounted against them: a proposition and two reasons, straw man, straw man and one reason, concession—tight little three-paragraph argument essays that placed a premium on organization and arrangement and a
minimum on the writer's own voice. Many of us were at that time committed
expressionists still in earnest pursuit of our own way of saying things, and many of
us hated writing to these restrictive, cookie-cutter forms. Why only three para-
graphs? we grumbled. Why did the proposition have to go there, at the end of the
first paragraph, the counter argument there, at the beginning of the second? Wasn't
all this emphasis on structure really privileging the dreaded five-paragraph essay in
a three-paragraph disguise? A rebellion began to brew.

In addition to our original argument papers, we also had to write “descriptive
outlines,” another Bruffee invention. One wrote descriptive outlines after writing a
first draft, not before. Writing descriptive outlines was head-scratching tediously, but
Bruffee maintained that they were essential to learning an instrumental distinc-
tion between form and content, a distinction that became the basis for the peer
reviews that we were soon assigned to write of each other's drafts, discussing
strengths and weaknesses in the argument's unity, coherence, development,
mechanics, and style. We found ourselves writing lengthy and detailed reviews of
each other's three paragraph essays. We read and reread these peer reviews with the
minutest attention. We also had to write back to our critics and review their reviews
of our drafts. Revisions of the argument papers were then required, and final papers
were read aloud in front of the entire group, a ritual that produced a good deal of
tension and gales of laughter.

We soon started acting just like students who are for the first time becoming inti-
mately involved in each other's writing but remain still strongly invested in what
the teacher thinks. We sought approval, and we rebelled at the same time. Bruffee
was unfailingly polite and listened carefully to our complaints about the Short
Course forms, but then insisted that we do what the assignments required anyway.
Without knowing it, we had arrived at the place in the peer tutor training course
that Bruffee calls “the crunch,” the turning point when writers must decide, “Am I
going to govern my words and ideas, or am I going to go on letting my words and
ideas govern me?” Bruffee maintains that no writing course should be without a
crunch because “people cannot change the way they formulate and express ideas
without undergoing some change in themselves.”

The simple but strict forms of A Short Course in Writing—and the authority
embedded in them—served at least a dual purpose in the Brooklyn Institute. On
the one hand, the Short Course forms and the collaborative learning regime fueled
the flames of the rebellion against the authority of the professor that Bruffee was
not only expecting but also counting on. At the same time, they also served to give
clear boundaries and expectations around which it became possible to organize
mutual aid. The clarity of the tasks and the rigor of the procedures became the solid ground in the sometimes-shifting geography of peer relations. Those sequenced, formalist writing and reading tasks and the rituals of exchanging papers and reading aloud shaped us from a collectivity of English instructors into a community of knowledgeable peers.

The Tuesday and Thursday afternoon sessions with Alex Gitterman were often tense, often hilarious, and occasionally deeply moving as he led us through our own experience within the group. We were vying for the scarce approval of the professor, whose assignments we noisily questioned yet worked mightily to complete, while at the same time we were negotiating authority among ourselves. It made one anxious, all this negotiation and uncertainty, and we were not above scapegoating each other, as Mara Holt describes in her essay “The Importance of Dissent to Collaborative Learning” in this volume. We were taking risks as writers and teachers, but we were also discovering the romance of trust that those risks make possible in the context of mutual aid. We were becoming very important in each other's intellectual development and, in the course of five weeks of intense living and working together, important in each other's lives. We were learning the skills and partnership of collaborative learning.

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Let me turn now to what my survey research demonstrates about the long-lasting influence of the Institute on former Brooklyn Institute Fellows 25 years later. At the time of the Institute, many of us were at the beginnings of our careers or at points of transition in more established careers, and the Brooklyn Institute served a number of formative functions for us. First, it initiated many of us into composition studies. All of us were trained or being trained in literary or historical studies rather than composition. Writing instruction was something we might have been doing for awhile, but many of us were flying by the seat of our pants, and we were flying alone. The Institute gave us new bearings, a language with which to think and talk about student writing and learning, and a discourse community in which to try it out. As Carol Stanger summed it up in her survey response, “I realized my academic potential. I got out of the slow lane professionally.”

A second formative function was the construction of a transitional community that could provide mutual aid as we moved along after the Institute into what was for us a new and unfamiliar profession in teaching writing. As a result of the Institute we not only had some training and a language with which to make sense of what was happening in front of us, we also had a cohort of colleagues with whom to plan conference presentations and workshops, share drafts of our articles, point
to and annotate important new work in the field, and, perhaps most importantly, have dinner with at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). The Institute, in this sense, did not end after the second or even the third year. It morphed into CCCC, the International Writing Centers Association, the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The social dynamics of group life around peer influence and mutual aid that was built into the very structure and ideology of the Institute itself proved to be both transformative and enduring.

Twenty-five years later the emotions that surrounded the process of developing into a mutual aid group remain vivid for many former Fellows. Jonathan Collet, for instance, remembers the sense of joy when he realized that he could “break loose” from the idea of knowledge as belonging only to the professor and to “discover with peers our own interpretation of a text. Imagine what this would be like for those not brought up in a culture of authority and emotional restraint!” Jay Jacoby remembers the experience of struggling with the teacher’s authority somewhat differently: “What comes to mind right now is the rather detailed and angry journal I kept during that five-week period. It was productive anger. If nothing else, it made me sympathetic to some of the anger my students later directed toward me in their journals.” And, 25 years later, Keith Beyer still remembers his feelings of guilt over joining in to scapegoat a colleague when the complexities of small group life threatened to overwhelm us. No, we didn’t necessarily always make nice, but we slowly earned trust and respect from each other as writers and thinkers through the ingenious curriculum of the Institute and the talent of its leaders, and that powerful experience stayed with us.

Most of us returned home from New York City and trained peer tutors with increasing skill and an enduring enthusiasm. I am perhaps the only one still at it after all these years, but many of us, particularly those who stayed at their sponsoring institutions, trained peer tutors in writing centers for much of their careers. Those of us who moved on to other institutions fairly soon after the Institute started new peer tutoring programs everywhere we went, planting the seeds of collaborative learning as best we could from Alabama to California. We trained peer writing tutors after the Brooklyn Institute for over twelve years on average, not a bad return on FIPSE’s original investment.

Based on what I find in the surveys, we all adapted the Brooklyn Plan to suit our local environments, but the basic thrust of training peer tutors the Ken Bruffee way has remained central to our practice and thinking. The theoretical language of collaborative learning and the social justification of belief that emerged through Bruffee’s scholarship—what we jokingly called Kuhn-Rorty-Fish—became for
many of us a timely introduction to postmodernist theory and gave us new and compelling insights into knowledge making in higher education, not to mention our very own socially-mediated selves. As Luisa Fels put it, “The materials Ken presented, in particular work by Rorty, ground and mashed and totally reconstructed my ability to think and to draw conclusions regarding my experiences.” At the Brooklyn Institute, practice led to theory, and theory led to new understandings of practice and thus to more theory. The Institute became a living, growing, annotated bibliography through which we entered the larger profession.

Reading through the surveys it becomes obvious that the peer tutoring focus of the Institute was merely the point of departure in our professional lives, not the end of the road. That we took what we learned as Institute Fellows back home and built peer tutoring courses and programs were to be expected. After all, this is what we agreed to do in order to secure our fellowships. But beyond this initial expectation we had no further obligation to anyone. Yet the survey clearly documents that the Institute resulted not only in the training of peer writing tutors, but in numerous and remarkably successful attempts to transform our teaching, our institutions, and our profession through our knowledge of and experience with collaborative learning at the Brooklyn Institute.

What we learned about collaborative learning initially in 1980-1982 unquestionably reshaped our sense of ourselves as teachers and our sense of our students as active participants in their own educations. All who responded to the survey mentioned that they had not only adopted collaborative learning approaches to training peer tutors, but that they had also used their knowledge to modify and improve their teaching of composition, literature and other subjects. As Peter Hawkes put it, “The Institute's focus on collaborative learning influenced every course I've taught since the early 1980s.” This migration of collaborative learning outside the boundaries of peer tutor training is universal among us. The Institute not only shaped the way we taught peer writing tutors, it changed our concept of knowing.

We also worked with our colleagues to bring collaborative learning practices into their teaching as well. We became our campus experts on collaborative learning, offering workshops and brown bag lunches. Some of us created entirely new structures within our institutions or among other institutions that brought collaborative learning theory and practice to bear well beyond our individual classrooms or writing centers. Carol Stanger initiated the Asnuntuck College Institute, also funded by FIPSE, which presented “a plan for regional dissemination of what was taught at the Brooklyn College Institute to post-secondary institutions within a fifty-mile radius of Enfield, Connecticut.” Bene Scanlon Cox helped to develop the Tennessee
Collaborative for Educational Excellence, a state-wide partnership of public K-12 and higher education institutions to improve academic programs at all levels. Ron Maxwell was instrumental in establishing the Schreyer Institute for Innovation in Learning at Penn State, a faculty development program which is dedicated to “support[ing] faculty in their efforts to incorporate active learning into their courses and teach students the social and cognitive skills necessary to become life-long learners.” Jonathan Collett organized a “Teaching for Learning Center” on the campus of the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, to “breathe life into my classes and my conversations with colleagues who were floundering.” Maryann Feola coordinated a Collaborative Learning Study Group at the College of Staten Island, which helped numerous colleagues incorporate collaboration into their teaching. It seems that we became career missionaries for collaborative learning, and as a cohort we have an impressive resume of workshop leadership in regional, national, and international venues.

The research and publications that have come from our interest in collaborative learning are diverse—everything from basic practice to high theory—and influential: we have authored articles on collaborative learning and peer tutoring in *College English, College Composition and Communication, Rhetoric Review, WPA: Writing Program Administration, The Writing Center Journal, The Writing Lab Newsletter, The Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy,* and the *Journal of Teaching Writing,* among others, not to mention a plethora of book chapters, introductions, and conference proceedings. Mara Holt is currently writing a book to be titled *Collaborative Learning in Composition Studies,* which will document, historicize, and theorize the major movements, and John Trimbur’s popular textbook, *The Call to Write,* now in its 4th edition, was heavily influenced by his work at the Institute. His article “Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms” is one of the most frequently cited in the literature of peer tutoring and won the National Writing Centers Association award for best article of the year; and his essay on “Consensus and Difference” has been influential well beyond the writing center. Let me close this section with something John said in his survey: “You know and I know that I wouldn’t be anywhere if I hadn’t been in the Institute.”

Collaborative learning has proven to be one of the major innovations in composition teaching in our career lifetimes. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, peer tutoring in writing centers and in classrooms became a significant feature of composition instruction in colleges and universities, and collaborative learning is probably as normal a part of how the writing process is thought about and taught in writing classrooms as is revision. Indeed, organizing students to learn from and
with each other has become such common practice in classroom and writing centers across the country that it is easy to forget that 25 years ago it was almost unheard of. The academy has been discovering over this time a new and effective way to engage students in their own educations, and the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors is arguably the beginning of that process of discovery.

The collective work of former Fellows of the Brooklyn Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors in teaching, scholarship, academic leadership and administration over the course of these 25 years clearly demonstrates that the ambitious plan devised by Kenneth Bruffee to train a cadre of change agents in the practice and theory of collaborative learning has been a remarkable success. We have trained and supervised hundreds if not thousands of peer writing tutors. We not only changed our own teaching, we helped our colleagues change theirs. We have built traditions of collaborative learning on our campuses and thus strengthened these institutions. We have led professional organizations. We have given papers at refereed conferences, written articles, and authored books published in prestigious venues in the field of composition and rhetoric that are plainly influenced by our work at the Institute. And we have done these things over and over again. “Over and over” is very important. Without repetition over time there can be no true educational innovation. Kenneth Bruffee, Alex Gitterman, and Marcia Silver constructed something new in the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors. The Fellows of the Institute have done the work of extending and repeating that innovation over and over and over again, helping to normalize collaborative learning into the everyday practice and theory of teaching writing.

WORKS CITED


