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The Importance of Dissent to Collaborative Learning

by Mara Holt

In 1989 Joseph Harris published a groundbreaking essay in *College Composition and Communication* titled “The Idea of Community in the Teaching of Writing.” Harris argued that the notion of community (and by implication, collaborative learning) is based on a model that brooks no dissent.1 In 2001, Zygmunt Bauman published a book titled *Communities* in which he argues that community isn't possible because it implies harmonious bliss. In the 2008 presidential election campaign, Hillary Clinton made fun of Barack Obama for promoting an unrealistic model of democratic change based on naive hope.2 What all these critiques of community miss is what I learned at the Brooklyn College Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors: Community based on mutual aid involves struggle. Without dissent, there is no collaborative learning.

At the Institute, we created a community through practicing collaborative learning, but not without strife. We arrived in New York as teachers, as writing center directors. Bruffee designed the Institute, however, for us to perform as students. For much of the Institute, then, we were treated like students, and we behaved like students—both in the classroom and without. We attended class at the CUNY Graduate Center on 42nd Street, and many of us were living in an NYU dorm across from Washington Square Park. Temporarily free from our professional and even our familial identities, we did nearly everything that undergraduates do—form temporary cliques, try to please the teacher without alienating our peers, complain about

About the Author

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the simplest things, distinguish ourselves from each other, and find common ground.

Complementary to our social lives as peers, we were intellectually engaged in writing short papers and three-layered peer critiques, and in small group and whole class collaborative discussions. Bruffee asked us to experience a version of his peer tutor training class while inviting us to discuss it intellectually as teachers and scholars. We sat in a circle, read our papers out loud, wrote critiques of each other's work, and discussed it all vociferously on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. We learned group dynamics from Alex Gitterman on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. We were assigned a three-paragraph paper one day, wrote it that night, and read it out loud the next morning. The first two papers were free topics; the last three were limited to writing instruction.

For the first paper, I wrote a defense of the controversial film *Cruising*. John Trimbur wrote on the Velvet Underground. Most of the papers were literary—an explication of a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, for instance. For the later papers we drew upon our past experiences as teachers and administrators and our current experiences as students of the Institute. I remember position papers on the failings of the Institute, analyses of the potential of descriptive outlines, and hotly debated issues such as whether a teacher is obligated to write the papers her students are writing. We used these papers both as ways to set up the peer critique process and as grounds for meta-talk about what we were learning at the Institute and in our readings, which included Dewey, Freire, Flower and Hayes, articles on group dynamics, and eventually Vygotsky and Rorty. As Harvey Kail has said elsewhere in this issue, “At the Brooklyn Institute, practice led to theory, and theory led to new understandings of practice and thus to more theory.”

Structured by Bruffee's well-designed tasks, we learned to negotiate our writing, our professionalism, and our relationships. To understand this, it may help to imagine us in Greenwich Village with papers to write nearly every night. Our motives were mixed. We were fascinated with New York; we were excited about doing the work of the Institute. Our relationship with our “teacher” had expanded to include peers to whom we had responsibilities. In order to have an author's response to the first critic, for instance, I had to first have the peer critique. If a group of us were going on the Staten Island Ferry and I didn't yet have the critique, I had a choice to make. Either show up for class the next day without an author's response or tell my peer that I wanted her to skip Staten Island to write my critique. Either way, I was responsible.
The road to maturity was not smooth. One of the unproductive uses of our power as peers was our tendency to scapegoat—to hold someone else responsible for our fears and anxieties. Our initial choice was Steve, who was Mormon. (The rest of us were Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Atheist—all white. Mormon passed for difference in this environment.) This was the tail end of the 'seventies,' and he wore a suit and tie every day. He complained loudly about the dearth of literary readings in our "course." Among ourselves we voiced the usual student complaints—not enough time to write the three-paragraph papers, pique at having to follow instructions, the desire for grades (even though Ken gave us immediate, detailed comments), outrage at having to rewrite a paper or cut it by several hundred words, gripes that descriptive outlines were "busy work." But Steve's complaints were public and relentless. He was too direct, too honest, a bad sport; he adamantly refused the three-paragraph form. He resisted Ken's authority, hated New York. We distanced ourselves from him to the point that it was acutely uncomfortable, and eventually he left.

A less dramatic act of scapegoating focused on Susan. In retrospect, I can see that Susan had more knowledge about rhetoric than any of us at the time. She was concerned about Bruffee's lack of attention to the rhetorical act of invention. Freewriting was a norm for sophisticated folks at this point in the discipline. Writing Without Teachers had been out for eight years. Susan must have seen Ken as retrograde. We didn't freewrite; we brainstormed in class. We called out issues that Ken wrote on the board in clusters. Partly because we were living in compressed time, doing the writing in five weeks that our students would have a quarter or semester to accomplish, we were asked to focus almost immediately on the product: "Write a three-paragraph paper." Our process started with the product. Then, the peer critiques began that would eventually result in a revision: descriptive outline, first peer critique, first author's response, second peer critique (or mediation), and final author's response. Our peer critiques were essays in themselves that addressed descriptive, evaluative, and substantive issues in the papers. Technically, then, Susan was right that Ken was giving standard invention short shrift, and in some sense she was standing in for our emotional reactions to the annoying, ego-bruising process that Bruffee was putting us through: "Wordy," he commented on my first revision. "Take out 200 words by tomorrow." Susan both complained insistently and also absented herself from the social life outside the class sessions. "We" were more comfortable with the underlife.5

But Alex Gitterman, then Professor of Social Work at Columbia, pushed us beyond that comfort to an understanding of our responsibility. He showed us how
to engage in productive dissent by asking us, with his guidance, to confront the issues directly. With Steve and Susan in the room, Alex asked us to talk outright about our scapegoating of them, what responsibility we had thrust upon them that was ours to take. Alex didn’t take sides; he watched us squirm and made us gently aware of what we were doing and its costs. He showed us how we had enacted behavior common to groups, and he asked us to reflect on that behavior, with everybody in the room. We told ourselves that we were doing this so we would know how to handle this with our students. That was the fiction that made everything possible.

To succeed in scapegoating the person who is the voice of dissent is to remove responsibility from the rest of the group and thus maintain the status quo, not such a good thing in democracy building. This is one way that groups can be an obstacle to change, which is not what Bruffee had in mind at all. His notion of “abnormal discourse,” from Kuhn and Rorty, was meant to function as a productive voice of dissent, despite the stereotype of community as perfect harmony, of consensus as squashing dissent.

Dissent is crucial to taking responsibility for one’s own contributions to productive community work. Ken didn’t have a problem with dissent. He expected it, encouraged it, even provoked it. He built it into both the written peer critique process and the small group consensus discussions. In his written peer critique process, for example, he asks the critic to argue substantive issues in the paper with the author, as well as to critique the paper as a piece of writing. In the next step, the author writes a response to the critic, then gives the paper, the critique and the response to a third peer or “mediator,” who joins the conversation. In my defense of the movie Cruising, for instance, the critic might have challenged me, noting that all over the country gays and lesbians were publicly boycotting the film. I might have responded by questioning his monolithic sense of the “gay community.” The mediator might have agreed with him, but showed me how to make my argument more persuasive. On a paper that argued that the Institute neglected invention, the peer critic and mediator could have taken a variety of stances. The issues that caused the most emotional heat among the 15 of us were right at hand, in our relationships with the Institute curriculum, how we perceived it meeting the needs of our home institution, and in our relationships with each other. My author’s response to the critic who took the Staten Island Ferry, for instance, addressed the issue of her tardiness and its impact on my work. Thus, conflicts were always already there. Bruffee’s process seemed to provoke them and then provide a structure for their expression.
Bruffee's method of “small group consensus discussion” asks the reporter in the group to record dissenting views. Often the lone dissent in one group is another group’s consensus. Acting as students, we saw how Bruffee handled small group consensus discussions, always asking the reporter to include dissenting voices in his report to the whole class, and often showing how the dissent in one group can be the consensus in another. During the last summer of the Institute, we categorized ourselves into groups based on the topics of the papers we wrote as our “tickets in” to the third year. There were papers on how well Institute practices transferred to our home institutions, others on the relationship of theorists such as Clifford Geertz and Stanley Fish to what we had come to know as social construction. And so on. I wrote a paper on resistance to the three-paragraph form, what Bruffee calls “the crunch” in his text Short Course, and how that could lead to an epiphanic sense of control over one’s writing. After several sessions of discussion within our groups, Ken asked for reports, expecting us to challenge each other’s conclusions, to engage each other’s issues. The practice group challenged the theory group to consider the pedagogical ramifications of their work; the theory group provoked the practice group to theorize their work. Voices were raised on both sides. Ultimately, we convinced each other. Neither pedagogy nor theory was privileged by the structure Bruffee set up. Each was expected to enrich the other through a structured engagement of conflict.

I took my own experiences with Ken’s leadership and with the importance of peer interaction into what turned into my career. The notion of conflict being an integral part of community stayed with me, formed part of the fabric of my thinking as I taught my own peer-tutoring classes in two different universities before returning to graduate school to pursue my Ph.D. As a tenured associate professor now, I have often encouraged diversity of opinion by seeking out dissenting voices.

I have internalized various approaches to conflict. One has to do with scapegoating. During a quarter when I was training new T.A.s, for example, I saw that one of the new graduate students didn’t “fit in.” Thomas was thin, quiet, aloof, and irreverant. He chose inopportune moments to call women “chicks” and to support the Plain English movement, anathema to literature students. He called the author of our text, Fragments of Rationality, “Les.” When the group began coalescing against him, I acknowledged him as a much-needed dissenting voice. I took seriously Thomas’ ideas without necessarily agreeing with them, and often I asked for his voice when the consensus was forming too comfortably away from him. Gradually, the group dynamics shifted. Thomas moved from isolated freak status to become a valued member of the community.
Although with Thomas, my approach was to diffuse conflict by embracing dissent, in a peer tutor training class in Daytona Beach, I implicitly encouraged students to distance themselves from me and gain their own collective authority. Once a colleague joined me as I sat outside a classroom, where I was waiting for my advanced composition students to invite me back in. They had created a provisional “union” and asked me to leave class while they worked out some “demands.” My colleague was aghast—at both the act and my incomprehensible calmness. When the students asked me back, I saw that there were demands written on the board, some of which I eventually agreed to, some not. That marked a turning point in the class, one after which students began taking responsibility for their own learning. Rather than scapegoating the doubters, they joined together and collectively voiced concerns (mainly over where this class was going, and why couldn’t I just tell them what good writing was so they could go on ahead and do it?). I was fine with this, but only because I had been privileged to go through a version of it, and I knew it was possible that their turning against me was the start of their turning toward themselves, interdependently.

Later at a workshop at Bard College, I realized that I had taken from the Institute a bias in favor of conflict, assuming that it would inevitably lead to productive growth and group autonomy. Harvey Kail, John Trimbur, Peter Hawkes and I were helping to lead a weekend workshop at which Ken Bruffee and Alex Gitterman were keynote speakers. Evaluating the workshop informally during a break, we wondered if things were going okay, disturbed that we saw few signs of conflict among the participants. At some point we realized the absurdity of our unconscious expectations: if conflict didn’t happen, if the participants didn’t turn against us, we had failed. After much laughter, I wondered if we had reified our experience in New York and had come to expect, even enjoy, the conflict that collaboration sometimes provoked. We concluded, with some irony, that collaborative learning could probably work without it.

Now, over ten years later, I’m not so sure. If things appear to go too “well” in a group, a class, a search committee, a faculty—might there be significant differences suppressed?

A lack of attention to the importance of dissent is at the heart of current problems with multiculturalism when it is seen as a celebration, rather than an engagement, of differences.

Ultimately, Harris, Bauman, and proponents of collaborative learning are on the same side. None of us wants a sense of community as reified harmony. Throughout his work, Bruffee has consistently valued dissent because he believes, as Walter
Lippman argues in “The Indispensable Opposition,” that we need to hear—not just tolerate—what the opposition has to say. Beverly M. John, arguing for the importance of faculty of color, points to the particular value of the non-dominant perspective, that of “the marginal mind and its position-based proclivity for observing and interpreting multiple realities” (59). A collaborative, mutual aid model assumes the importance of everyone, and then works to attain that goal with more or less success, allowing for contextual flexibility.

Ken Bruffee has consistently modeled this nuanced sense of democracy in both words and deeds. His work with us at the Institute gave us a structure from which to evaluate a variety of issues that make up our academic lives—from particular classroom dynamics to postmodern theories of identity. His continued relationships with us beyond the Institute, and ours with each other, have deepened my sense of community built on collaboration over a long period of time. His professional and personal ethics have continued to ground me in the various institutions in which I have worked. I don’t think I’m alone in this. I see it as well in my colleagues who participated in the Institute. We experienced a productive dialectic of conflict and common ground borne of struggle and good will over decades of our careers. This sense of community works in the long run because it is premised on the importance of that struggle to the well being of the group and of the individuals.10

NOTES

1 In a 2001 article in The Journal of Basic Writing (“Beyond Community to Materialism”), Harris responds to Mark Wiley’s critique of him by affirming the idea of [creating] a social network that encourages students not to simply absorb but also to talk and argue together about the ideas they encounter in their classes. If that is what community means, then I’m all for it (5).

2 Obama responded to Clinton by questioning her notion of hope as something you sit back and wait for, rather than something you work for.

3 For an explanation of the three-paragraph essay, see Bruffee’s text Short Course and Beth Daniell’s article “A Long Course in Teaching Writing” in this issue.

4 My article “The Value of Written Peer Criticism” gives a fuller account of the process and sequence of peer critiques.

5 I’d like to complicate the “we.” There were fissures within the group related to such issues as personality, gender, and level of education—at least. I am using the “we” conveniently, to demonstrate roughly the group process the members experienced, but it is an oversimplification of what actually happened, and particularly limited because it represents one person’s perspective.

6 Cruising is a controversial film starring Al Pacino as an undercover cop investigating a string of homicides in a group of butch gay men who frequented leather bars and engaged in frequent, violent, anonymous sex. Pacino takes on the perspective of the gay men in the film; the director asks the audience to complicate its judgment of this gay stereotype.

7 Trimbur’s “Consensus and Difference” addresses this issue from another angle.

8 This strategy on my part, of course, didn’t always work.
Kail and Trimbur’s article “The Politics of Peer Tutoring” explains a process of students gaining collective authority through collaborative learning.

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WORKS CITED


