A Long Course in Teaching Writing

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Bob Connors used to say that textbooks teach the teachers. And he was right—the really good composition books teach us how to teach writing. They teach us about rhetoric or argument. They show us how to set up a writing course based on the aims of language—expression, exposition, persuasion—or ways of thinking—evaluation, analysis, synthesis—or types of information—observation, library research, memory. The readers teach us something about classic texts that capture the “enduring issues” or about hip new theoretical perspectives or about the culture around us. Over the years, I’ve learned from many excellent textbooks, but only one has continued to teach me: Kenneth Bruffee’s A Short Course in Writing.

Twenty-five years ago at the University of Texas, my classmate Mara Holt talked a great deal about Ken Bruffee and collaborative learning (CL)—she was, as you see elsewhere in this issue, a member of Bruffee’s original Brooklyn Institute. But Mara’s discussion of CL sounded, frankly, just a little too pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by for me. Since I’d taught high school, I knew what it was like to teach too many students and to need, therefore, a concrete, manageable method. After Mara successfully argued to the Freshman English Policy Committee for the inclusion of A Short Course on the list of approved alternate texts, I finally read Bruffee’s book. It was not at first the collaborative learning that impressed me; it was, rather, Bruffee’s emphasis on the structure of the essay. Clearly, Bruffee had taught real students to write.

In my last year of graduate school, I adopted Bruffee’s textbook and re-shaped my first-year composition course. I’m still using it—in my own first-year comp courses, in advanced writing, and in graduate courses—because Bruffee’s methods still work. I am always the only person at my university who uses it. I understand why:

About the Author
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*A Short Course* is the quirkiest textbook I've ever seen. And, to be honest, it presents some dangers: If you don't already know a great deal about teaching writing and rhetoric, you could use it to be a structure-Nazi—that is, you could do to students with Bruffee's three-paragraph forms what thousands of teachers do to students with the five-paragraph essay. When I became comp director at Clemson in 1994, I told the HarperCollins sales rep that I would consider adopting *A Short Course* for the teaching assistants' classes if he could find even one program in the country using the book. He couldn't, and so I didn't. But I did use Bruffee's ideas as the basis of lectures to the TAs about argument, thesis, reasons, evidence, structure and organization, peer workshops, and group assignments.

There are many reasons why this book remains so central to my thinking about writing and teaching writing. First, of course, is structure. According to the ancients, arrangement is the second canon of rhetoric, coming only after invention. When I was in graduate school, the emphasis was on invention. The idea seemed to be that if teachers would just let students write, eventually they would find not only what they wanted to say but also how to organize it. My experience, on the other hand, was that while some very bright and well-read students might discover or decide on the structure they need for a discourse, the majority flounder. When you help students individually with arrangement, they catch on quick. But once out of our writing classes, will these students have time to struggle toward organization? Will they have teachers who will read drafts and show them how to arrange their material? *A Short Course* offers students several clear patterns of organization that, later, they can mix and match. According to Bruffee, you can teach arrangement.

Part of our reluctance to teach organizational patterns is our distaste for the ubiquitous and mindless five-paragraph essay. The problem with the five-paragraph essay isn't the five paragraphs; it's that it's the only form that's taught. Students don't know that there are other ways to structure an essay. *A Short Course* assigns three-paragraph position papers: an introductory paragraph with a thesis statement and two paragraphs of explanation and argument for that thesis. But each assignment is different—Two Reasons, Nestorian Order, Strawman, Strawman Plus One, Concession—all eminently teachable. Together these patterns demonstrate that there are many forms, not just one, giving students a repertoire of organizational patterns to choose from. After a little practice with several or all of these forms, students begin to see the paragraphs as building blocks. The last paper I assign in any course in which I use the *A Short Course* patterns requires students to create their own form and give it a name. They come up with Concession Plus Three, Strawman Plus Concession Plus Two, Four Reasons in Ten Paragraphs, Concession
Plus Extended Nestorian, and so forth. Now they see that the form depends on the material. The *Short Course* forms are finger exercises that teach arrangement through experience, not through lecture or exposition.

The second reason I continue to use Bruffee's book also concerns arrangement—but invention, too, specifically how to find the material for a Beginning or an Ending. Introductions and conclusions are particularly hard for students who have had the five-paragraph form pounded into them. From Plato on down, we hear that discourse needs a Beginning, a Middle, and an Ending, but no one tells young writers How to Begin or End. Bruffee's inside-out method of writing a paper asks students to write the Middle first. Then when a writer knows what her argument is and who she's arguing against and who her audience is, she will know, or can find, the context to invoke in the Beginning paragraph. Typically, it takes a while for students to see that an intro paragraph is neither a thesis plus mini-outline (which is what the five-paragraph essay teaches: Tell-'em-what-you're-going-to-tell-'em) nor a formula (The dictionary defines X as Y...or Take one part X and two parts Y...). The introduction, instead, sets up the argument by contextualizing the thesis; it draws the reader in by giving background or explaining the problem. Once students get that—it takes my students half the semester—then you can talk about how a longer paper might need a mini-outline as well as the context-creating Beginning. You can get them to focus on the needs of the reader: The mini-outline is not for the writer; it's there to serve as a map for the reader's journey through a long argument. No reader, I tell them, is so dumb as to need a mini-outline for only two more paragraphs!

Bruffee treats the Ending similarly. At first students are not allowed to write one. *A Short Course* asks writers to focus on the meat of the argument—the Reasons, what's in the Middle. This also means, as I explain to my students, they can't just write until they stumble upon a thesis and then quit; they have to know what their thesis is—Bruffee calls it a proposition—before they begin. I ask my students whether they've ever turned in for a grade essentially a discovery draft—a freewrite wherein they finally figure out, in the last paragraph, what they really want to say. The reply is invariably many guilty looks. With Bruffee's method, students may freewrite as much as they need to in order to find the proposition, and they can reword it or revise it after any draft. But the essay they hand in is to be consciously made: They cannot make the essay until they have a proposition, and they cannot make a Beginning or an Ending until they have a Middle.

In *A Short Course* the first few papers have no Ending: these papers just stop after the last Reason. And, yes, it feels weird—so weird that some students just can't not
write an Ending. But the discipline forces writers to focus on the Middle, where the heart of the argument is. And, when finally A Short Course asks for an Ending, Bruffee’s instruction is way better than the Ending as Summary, better than the old Tell-'em-what-you-told-'em method. Now that a writer has demonstrated the validity of the proposition by means of the argument in the Middle, the Ending explains why that argument is important and to whom. Bruffee asks students to think larger—to see the implications of what they think, to look to a larger context: Why is this important? Who should care? What other issues is my stand related to? What are the implications of my proposition? Why have I made this argument this way?

A third thing A Short Course teaches—something that made intuitive sense to me immediately and makes even more sense with each passing year—is Bruffee’s admonishment that teachers can constrain the form or the content of student writing, but not both. Bruffee explains this theoretically and practically in the Introduction to the Third Edition (24-25). At first, I thought that this meant students could write essays only about topics of their own choosing. I soon tired of this and began having students read on a topic of my choosing—language and identity is one of my favorites. In response to these readings, they write informal papers they share aloud with the class. In these responses and the discussions that follow, we find the issues, which Bruffee defines as “sharable concerns” (46-47), that are worth arguing about. We spend an entire class naming the issues in the readings and thinking up the generalizations—propositions Bruffee calls them—that speak to those issues. When I assign the essay—Two Reasons, or Nestorian, or whatever—most students choose to write about the readings and issues we’ve discussed in class. But sometimes they pick something else entirely. My job then is not to veto their topic or thesis, but to help them with, say, the Two Reasons that will support that thesis and the evidence they need to shore up the Two Reasons. Using this simple mantra—that I can constrain the form or the content, but not both—I’ve been able to help students make very smart arguments for positions I fundamentally disagree with. The result is that the student is invested in the argument, writing, for example, his own Concession paper, not just fulfilling the assignment by psyching out my opinions and reiterating them in order to make a good grade. By focusing on the forms, I’ve learned to be a sophist—I can teach argument to anyone who shows up, not just those who agree with me, though I do demand that all arguments be intelligent.

Which leads to the fourth thing that A Short Course helps me do—grade fairly. If a student has the same reason in both middle paragraphs in the Two Reasons paper,
then I point this out and "count off" on the grade, no matter how eloquently written or how passionately I approve of his proposition. Fluent writers are often disconcerted when I diagnose this sort of problem. If the student writes a concluding paragraph—when concluding paragraphs are eventually allowed—that only summarizes the argument, I mark the student's grade down—even if that paper is very good, its reasons well stated, and the evidence strong. Indeed, Bruffee's method lets me grade fairly those positions I disagree with. I used to lean over backwards in order to be fair to students who wrote on positions I disagreed with. Now I can say to any student, no matter what his political stance, "Your second middle paragraph names the reason and repeats it several times. But it does not, unfortunately, offer evidence to support this reason. Why would someone say that Maxine's mother is cruel? Can you quote Kingston saying that? Can you tell an incident in the book that would make someone see that she mistreats her children? Can you quote the mother herself? Joe, this is probably a perfectly valid reason, but a reader needs for you to show that, not just claim it." In other words, when I pick up a paper, I am looking for the organizational pattern and for a convincing argument. And knowing that, I can make specific comments that are helpful: "Jenny, your middle paragraphs are really good. Your second par gives an excellent example of Nestorian order with 5 (count 'em) Reasons. But more important than just following the assignment, you gave another sentence of explanation or a good example of each reason in that paragraph. Yeah, you!! Par 3—the best reason—is good, too—but I wanted a bit more. Maybe another example. I felt as if something was missing. The weakness of the essay is the intro. You jump right into your proposition without giving the context a reader needs—why are you interested in this topic? Who else might be? What got you to your proposition? I want you to think about all these questions next time you write an intro par." Bruffee's forms help me be specific about what is strong or weak in a paper. But more important, because the students also know Bruffee's terms, they understand the language I use as I look at drafts or grade final versions. No one writes on my evaluations, "I didn't understand my grades."

The fifth thing in A Short Course that I continue to learn from is the Descriptive Outline. The first Descriptive Outline is written by a student not before but after he completes the first draft of the essay. It tells what each paragraph is saying—standard stuff. But more important, the Descriptive Outline tells what each paragraph is doing. Paragraphs introduce, explain, give examples, offer analogies, define, summarize, list, describe, cite research, tell stories, give demographic statistics, offer implications, explain the cause, and so forth. But this concept—that
paragraphs do things—is new to students. I’ve never had a single class in more than twenty years where all the students “got” the does part of the Descriptive Outline, despite a great deal of practice writing Descriptive Outlines of their own drafts and of their peers’.

When students grasp the concept that paragraphs serve a function, they have more control over their writing. They can decide consciously, for example, to support the first reason in paragraph two by describing the current situation and explain the second reason in paragraph three by means of an analogy. When students “get” the does part of the Descriptive Outline, they acquire both a new vocabulary for talking about texts and a new heuristic for generating material. This is what I talk about when writing center directors ask me to talk to tutors. I show WC tutors how to write Descriptive Outlines because this notion of a paragraph—or any block of prose—serving a function in addition to just saying something has helped me become a more productive critic of my own writing as well as other people’s. I hear myself saying to a graduate student, for example, “So what is all this stuff doing here in this chapter? What’s it supposed to do?” And when the student tells me, I can give her a way to make that clear to their readers: “Okay, so say that at the beginning of this paragraph, and then remind your reader periodically—at the beginning of these next couple of paragraphs—that you are continuing your analysis of the sociological point of view.” A Short Course has taught me how to show students how and where to incorporate the metadiscourse they need to make academic prose readable.

The best thing about the Descriptive Outlines is that they allow students to help one another in substantive ways. They keep students from merely marking punctuation and spelling while requiring them to pay attention to higher-order concerns—that is, to the argument and the support for it. As I explain, if the Peer Descriptive Outline doesn’t look like the Descriptive Outlines you wrote for your own essay, then there’s a problem. Perhaps the peer didn’t read carefully and wrote a sloppy outline. But perhaps she did, and the problem is that you didn’t say what you thought you were saying. Or perhaps you misunderstood the assignment. With the Descriptive Outline, which reflects back to the writer a skeleton of the essay, we have a kinder, gentler way to begin teaching students how to write peer critiques, a way that does not ask students to pass judgment on people they have just met the week before and might want to go out with the next week. After the first round, the Peer Descriptive Outlines are supplemented with Peer Memos so that students can offer suggestions or remind peers of information they might include (see Holt for a much fuller explanation).
So *A Short Course* offers a teachable method for teaching arrangement, for communicating to students their strengths and weaknesses, and for helping students give each other feedback for revision. All very good, you say. But what is it about this book that makes me continue to use it after twenty-five years? Of most significance for me is that *A Short Course* helps me ground my pedagogy in theory. Bruffee's method offers teachers a way to instantiate in their classrooms Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. *A Short Course* offers students assignments that are unthreatening in their apparent simplicity, but which are at the same time challenging. While the assignments are do-able, they turn out better with substantive help from peers in workshop.

Bruffee also brings the principles of the rhetoric into the classroom in authentic ways. Indeed, *A Short Course* helped me learn to teach rhetoric, not "composition"—a term which too often evokes not "putting together," but school writing sans writer, sans readers, sans context, sans purpose. Each assignment in *A Short Course* asks students to take a stand and then defend it. Some of Bruffee's forms—Strawman, Strawman Plus One, and Concession—require the writer not only to recognize that other people disagree with her but also to deal with those disagreements head on. Bruffee's *A Short Course* teaches the main ideas of rhetoric: The writer comes first (ethos)—her idea, her proposition; next come the reasons and the evidence for each reason (logos); then the introduction (pathos, ethos, logos) and finally the conclusion (pathos and logos). Bruffee teaches that argument without good reasons—without reasons that are supported, developed, explained—is empty, precisely the lessons of Aristotle and Cicero. Bruffee teaches that pathos is not a cheap emotional trick to hook the unsuspecting reader in, but rather an appeal to reader's interest, or knowledge, or experience. In the method Bruffee teaches, ethos is not solipsism, but taking a position, making a stand for what we think and believe. For Bruffee, all of this occurs only in a particular discourse community, pointing out to students that the rhetor's job is to find the reasons, the words, that move the audience and showing teachers how to provide students a real audience. This real audience in the classroom becomes the bridge community that helps students move from their home discourse communities to the ones at the university. For Bruffee, rhetoric is not theoretical: The process is social from start to finish—from articulating the issues, to shaping the propositions, to finding the most effective means of persuasion. *A Short Course* offers a method that encourages me to help students say what they want to say.

In this article, I have not talked much about collaborative learning, a major component of *A Short Course*, nor have I discussed Bruffee's excellent advice on making
assignments for group work. But I hope I have convinced you that this quirky little book has played a vital role in my sometimes being present at the Creation—those moments when students learn that they can write.

WORKS CITED
