



Harvey Kail

Kenneth A. Bruffee, 1934–2019: An Exemplary Figure for Writing Centers

Kenneth A. Bruffee died in Brooklyn, New York, on January 20, 2019. He was professor emeritus of English at Brooklyn College, where he taught for many years and at various times directed the first-year English program, founded and directed the writing center, and directed the Scholars Program and Honors Academy. He is an exemplary figure for writing center and composition scholars because he was instrumental in establishing and conceptualizing peer tutoring in the teaching of writing.

Bruffee began experimenting with peer tutoring in the 1970s as a response to the open-admissions policies that almost overnight brought hundreds of underprepared students to City University of New York campuses. Peer tutoring, he discovered, worked surprisingly well in that context. Properly prepared and situated, undergraduate student tutors seemed not only capable but also actually exemplary partners to their peers during the writing process. As he trained and supervised peer tutors in the 1970s and wrote and reflected about his experiences, he formed two related questions that shaped much of his subsequent career and the development of writing centers, as well. First, if peer tutoring improved writers and writing at Brooklyn College, could it do the same elsewhere? And, second, why was peer tutoring so effective?

In answer to the former question, Bruffee wrote the original peer-tutor training manual, *A Short Course in Writing: Practical Rhetoric for Composition Courses, Writing Workshops, and Tutor Training Programs* (1980) to systematize the preparation of peer writing tutors. To introduce writing center directors from around the country to his “Brooklyn Plan” and to test whether his approach to peer tutoring could flourish elsewhere, he also founded and directed the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors. He soon became an academic activist and, over the next two decades, gave numerous papers, talks, and keynote speeches; published influential articles; and conducted dozens of workshops to develop and promote the practice of collaborative learning and peer tutoring to the world outside Brooklyn.

In response to the second, related question—Why was peer tutoring so effective?—Bruffee began an exhilarating, interdisciplinary investigation into the conceptual underpinnings of collaborative learning. Marked by an insatiable if amiable curiosity, his wide-ranging scholarship ran from nuts-and-bolts articles on how to set up a peer-tutoring program to ground-breaking articles on how we think and how we gain knowledge, published in *College English*, *Liberal Education*, *Change Magazine*, and others. This work includes his famous 1984 *College English* essay, “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind.” Writing from a web of interdisciplinary sources, Bruffee argued that conversation among “knowledgeable peers” is the very essence of learning. Not only does conversation form the basis of what we justify to each other as knowledge, but also conversation is the raw material of reflective thought itself. Peer tutoring works because properly trained students are uniquely situated in the academy to engage in conversation with their peers on writing and thus to sustain “the conversation of mankind.” For those of us working in writing centers at the time, it was astonishing to read Bruffee’s valuing of peer tutoring in the venerable pages of *College English*. It was as if Bruffee was saying to us that writing centers, even with their marginal budgets and often haphazard administrative structures, their second-hand furniture and generally low institutional status, were, nevertheless, at the very forefront of teaching and learning. Peer tutoring was a model of knowledge-forming conversation. With the publication of this essay, it became possible to reconceive our writing labs into what we came then to think of as writing centers, a new kind of academic space where sponsored conversations among peers about their writing shaped the curriculum. Much of what we do now in writing centers and how we do it can and should be attributed to the inspired leadership and ground-breaking scholarship of Kenneth A. Bruffee.

While there is no doubt his work will continue to matter, those of us who were lucky enough to know him will miss the man himself, the way he would throw back his head and laugh heartily even in the midst of the most intense conversations, his engaging curiosity that insisted on figuring things out (“perhaps you could help?”), his gentleness and his generosity, his brilliance and his human competence, his courage and his convictions. We were much the better for him and thank him from our hearts.

References

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Harvey Kail is professor emeritus of English at the University of Maine, was a fellow of the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors in 1980, and guest edited a special edition of *The Writing Center Journal* (28.2) on Kenneth Bruffee: “Kenneth Bruffee and the Brooklyn Plan.”