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Vietnam Protests, Open Admissions, Peer Tutor Training, and the Brooklyn Institute: Tracing Kenneth Bruffee's Collaborative Learning

by Peter Hawkes

Vietnam War Protests and Open Admissions came to Brooklyn College in the late 1960s and early 1970s, challenging the status quo and creating conditions for change in the teaching of writing. In response to these movements, Kenneth Bruffee originated Brooklyn College's first successful drop-in writing center. He also created the College's first course that trained students to be peer tutors in writing. Both initiatives played a role in his development of a version of small group work that he called collaborative learning. Over the next four decades, Bruffee explained and justified the method by mining insights from social science research and social constructionist thought. His most recent work focuses on how collaborative learning creates human interdependence through guided conversation among peers, which links the method back to its origins in the collaborative work of peer tutor writing centers.

Vietnam Protests and Open Admissions

Brooklyn College hired Bruffee to teach British Romantic literature in 1966. A year later and for four successive springs—1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970—Brooklyn College was the stage for student protests, boycotts, rallies, strikes, and police brutality. On October 20, 1967, a group of “leftwing anti-war groups” shut down a Navy recruitment table in Boylan Hall. The police dragged off the protest leaders and clubbed students on the head, thereby precipitating a demonstration involving thousands of students who protested police brutality (Bigart 1, 8). Sixty students

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were arrested (Hoffman 40), and a four-day strike followed (Schumach, “Brooklyn” 1). A few days later Mayor John Lindsay referred to Brooklyn College as “Berkeley East” (Schumach, “Students” 33).

The following spring, on April 27, 1968, Brooklyn College again made the front page of *The New York Times* with a picture of anti-war students demonstrating on the college quad (Stern 1). A month later 40 white students broke into the Registrar’s Office and held it for 16 hours. The students demanded that Brooklyn College add “1000 negroes and Puerto Ricans by September” (Collier 1, 51). At the time, Brooklyn College had 10,008 matriculated students. Of these, only 119 were black and 42 were Puerto Rican (Kihss 48). Meanwhile, these two groups composed “more than 50 per cent of the students in city high schools” (Schumach, “C.C.N.Y.” 31).

The next spring, on April 23, 1969, six black students disrupted a Faculty Council Meeting, pushing the President away from the podium and seizing it. They “presented 18 demands, including the admission of all black and Puerto Rican applicants, regardless of their grades” (Schumach, “C.C.N.Y.” 1, 31). Nine days later 200 students broke into the President’s office (Schumach, “Vandals” 43). For weeks, there were smoke bombs, broken windows, vandalism, disturbances in the library, break-ins by marauding students, clashes with police and arrests (Perlmutter, “100” 51; “2 Held” 32). Students set fires on campus with Molotov cocktails, and when the fire department arrived, 100 students blocked their entrance (Perlmutter, “100” 1). A strike was called (Perlmutter, “Students” 21).

The following spring, on April 4, 1970, four Kent State students were killed during protests of the expanded war into Cambodia, and the next day students at Brooklyn College voted to strike (Charlton 18). This was the fourth successive year of student protests about the Vietnam War and Open Admissions, and the two issues were related. Most of those drafted to serve in Vietnam were blacks and Puerto Ricans who did not have college deferments because their grades were not high enough to be accepted into the CUNY system. The Open Admissions protests were to some degree about the Vietnam War.

Bruffee’s engagement with these events went beyond the role of simple witness. During the period, he “was being educated politically” by two significant influences: a writer friend who “dragged [him] around to protest meetings on campus,” and a “highly political dean,” who headed a unit “devoted to working with open admissions students” (Bruffee, Letter). Among “signal events,” Bruffee reports, were “finding a cop in jackboots outside my classroom door as one of the protests began and realizing that he and I were basically on the same side—at least, the same

politician signed his pay check and mine; [and] seeing real fanatical hatred in the faces of students racing through the halls with lead pipes” (Letter).

The protests succeeded in bringing Open Admissions to Brooklyn College five years before it was planned. In three years from 1970 on, Brooklyn College grew from 14,000 to 34,000 students (Bruffee, *Collaborative* 15). Its classes were overcrowded, and its green lawns were scattered with temporary classrooms. To relieve some of the crowding, a second campus was opened in downtown Brooklyn (Farber 21; Nolan 103). The institution was simply unprepared for the large numbers of new students.

Peer Tutor Training

In September 1970, Bruffee became Brooklyn College’s Director of Freshman English, its first under Open Admissions. In his own words, he faced a daunting task: to “organize . . . a program of courses in writing at all levels, remedial to advanced, that would meet the needs of the new students, teach [his] English Department colleagues how to teach remedial writing,” and manage a significant number of newly hired and relatively inexperienced adjunct professors who were teaching a large quantity of overenrolled sections of freshman comp a year (*Collaborative* 15). The rapid expansion of Brooklyn College—the sheer numbers of new students and writing sections needed to teach them—meant that old patterns and routines were disrupted. Business could not continue as usual.

Out of desperation, Bruffee called up other Directors of Freshman English in the City University system. They met regularly at a Manhattan coffee shop and discussed such books as Sennet and Cobb’s *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In effect, they formed a peer support group whose purpose was to describe the Open Admissions students that were new to all of them. The group included Mina Shaughnessy, Harvey Weiner, Donald McQuade, and Sondra Perl, all of whom would make significant contributions to the field of composition (*Collaborative* 16-21; Interview, October 1996).

As part of his job, Bruffee visited teachers in the classroom and observed that the traditional lecture was not working for many Open Admissions students, especially during this period of anti-war protests when all sorts of interrogations of authority were going on (Interview, March 1992; “Collaboration” 1). He began to identify the problem with learning in the classroom as the sovereignty of the teacher and the authority-dependence of the students. He asked, How can the traditional roles of teacher and student be redefined?

At the time, Brooklyn College, independent of him, had hired a number of graduate students and adjuncts, put them into a barn, and advertised them as professional tutors in English. Unfortunately, the strategy didn't work. Grad students were too much like teachers. Few undergraduates showed up (Letter). Meanwhile, Bruffee met a student who started a drop-in counseling service staffed solely by peers. It flourished. So Bruffee took it as a model. He set up a peer-tutoring center, located it near the subway entrance to campus, made it "free of bureaucracy, anonymous, drop-in and staffed mainly by students" (Letter). Students poured in. In order to train the peer tutors needed to staff the writing center, Bruffee "bootlegged a tutor training course into the curriculum under the rubric of Advanced Comp" (Letter). He put the tutors in groups to model the way they would eventually function with peers (Interview, October 1996). Collaborative learning in the teaching of writing can be said to begin with Bruffee's peer-tutor training course.

Campus protests; Open Admissions; the rapid expansion of the student body; the influx of many underprepared, nontraditional students entering college for the first time, some bringing with them interrogations of authority born of the anti-war movement, Black power, and feminism; discussions with writing directors in addressing the new students; the observed failures of the traditional lecture; the success in creating a writing center, a peer tutoring course, and the experiments with small group work—all of these fed in various ways into Bruffee's publications in the early 70s.

Some consider Bruffee's January 1972 *College English* article entitled "The Way Out" as a "60's protest document." As he himself has noted, "First, it was a protest against traditional pedagogy" (Letter). Bruffee attacked the lecture, Socratic questioning, the seminar, and even the tutorial on the grounds that they were an "authoritarian-individualistic mode of education" ("The Way Out" 458). "A student," Bruffee claimed, "talks to the teacher, writes to the teacher, and determines his fate in relation to the teacher, individually" (459). Further, the essay critiqued other protests against traditional pedagogy on the grounds they simply tried to give authority away (Letter). Finally, the essay delivered an idealistic and utopian message of reform that fit the times. This "was a period in which young people were experimenting with restructuring American society and American selves. Restructuring education had to be a part of that" (Letter).

Columbia's School of Social Work and The New School

Bruffee was now using groups regularly in his own classes, but he found that he had only mixed success—sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't—and

he didn't know why (Interview, March 1992). Lacking an explanation, he went back to graduate school. He spent 1972-73 at Columbia University's School of Social Work, studying with William Schwartz, who did pioneering work on small group practices during the 1950's ("CL: Relevance").

The challenge Bruffee faced at Columbia was taking what Schwartz knew about small groups used for counseling and applying it to a classroom situation. Eventually, Bruffee found social science research confirmed his assumption that the teacher's traditional authority role inhibited student learning and that groups could change the authority relations in the classroom. An unpublished paper Bruffee wrote in 1973 showed him using social science research to devise explanations for his collaborative practice—in effect, to develop a technology of group management that explained such things as optimal group size, group tasks, group roles, group composition, and group dynamics ("CL: Relevance").

That same year Bruffee published another *College English* article entitled "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models" that for the first time in print made a number of now familiar arguments justifying collaborative learning as a powerful alternative to traditional forms of writing instruction. First, teachers should use collaborative learning because the peer group gives students a sense of audience. Moreover, collaborative learning trains students to become better readers because they are asked to evaluate each other's work. Groups also offer emotional support to students as they negotiate the painful process of gaining new awareness. Finally, collaborative learning breaks down the passivity of students, allowing them to become teachers. "People themselves learn, when they teach others" (55). These social science explanations also informed the collaborative learning model he demonstrated to other teachers at the Conference on College Composition and Communication and at many colleges across the country and that he described beginning with the second edition of his composition textbook, *A Short Course in Writing*.

But it was during those many demos on the road in the late 1970s that he developed a kind of dread (Interview, March 1992). He had learned from Schwartz and others how to explain how groups work in terms of the social sciences, but when he was asked by participants how students actually learned in groups, he didn't have an answer (Interview, March 1992). So Bruffee went back to graduate school, this time to study epistemology with Reuben Abel at the New School in the fall of 1980 ("Liberal" 113). During one of these evening classes, a student came running in waving a copy of Richard Rorty's newly published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Bruffee marks the reading of this book as the beginning of a new way of

thinking and talking about groups (Interview, March 1992). Although Rorty was the main influence, Bruffee gained important insights from the works of Thomas Kuhn, Bruno Latour, Stanley Fish, Clifford Geertz, Lev Vygotsky, and Roberto Unger, among others. Through his readings, Bruffee became a social constructionist, and it was this nonfoundational explanation he used in a series of essays beginning in 1981 and later in his book *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* to justify the use of collaborative learning.

The Brooklyn Institute

During the same period, Bruffee received a grant from FIPSE to sponsor a Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors (1980-82). The purpose was to draw writing center directors and composition teachers for instruction in his model of peer tutoring, which they would then bring back to their campuses. What the Brooklyn Fellows called Bruffee's Kuhn-Rorty-Fish explanation of collaborative learning went something like this: Students not only need to change their relationship to the authority of the teacher, but they also need to change their relationship to the authority of knowledge itself. Bruffee wants his students to recognize that knowledge does not exist in some sort of correspondence with objective reality but that knowledge is a social artifact produced by culturally and linguistically situated communities. Collaborative learning serves as a clue to that insight because its negotiations and collective decision-making mirrors the way knowledge itself is constructed by larger, more prestigious knowledge groups. Social constructionist thought provided Bruffee with language to talk about how students learn in groups. The teacher's authority in the classroom derives from his or her membership in a prestigious knowledge group. Students do not as yet belong to this more prestigious group, but if they wish to join—say, the community of Standard English speaking people—they must loosen their ties with groups they belong to and negotiate a new membership through a transitional group (“Collaboration” 4).

The transitional group is provided by the collaborative learning classroom. It offers students an opportunity for task-guided extended conversation during which they learn the new language of the knowledge community they wish to join and renovate language they already know. Through the use of new language conventions the student is able to negotiate membership in a new community of knowledgeable peers (“Conversation” passim). In Ben Click's phrase, “Students enter talking one way and leave talking another” (3). Collaborative learning offers stu-

dents task-guided conversation and negotiation to reach a consensus on their own authority. It is a pedagogy of reacculturation because it helps students join communities they do not yet belong to (Bruffee, “Social” 784).

Setting the Table

Over a long career, Bruffee has sustained the discussion of collaborative learning by seeking to relate the method to larger contexts. Now he has set the table for others to explore some of the potential of his method. Let me mention a few directions:

First of all, Bruffee calls collaborative learning a pedagogy of reacculturation. That reacculturation depends on students in peer groups forming a transitional language that will help them enter the new knowledge community. But in what ways do the communities that students already belong to prevent them from entering meaningful conversation? Gender, race, class, ethnicity, as Irene Ward suggests, “do produce uneven power relations that authorize some members’ voices and tend to silence or ignore others” (84-85). How is the conversation in the classroom needed for reacculturation disrupted by “status differentiation” among students?

Another direction is the exploration of collaborative learning as a pedagogy that leads students to a kind of critical consciousness that, in turn, leads to social change. Students are able to negotiate entry into new discourse communities through guided conversation. What are the opportunities for students to question the values and perspectives of the community they are seeking to join so as to change eventually the community they are joining?

Further, Bruffee has from the first identified authority as a key issue in student learning. The authority of the teacher depends on his or her membership in a prestigious knowledge community, and the knowledge of that community is socially constructed. Bruffee’s work focuses on how individual knowledge communities construct knowledge. One direction is to explore how individual communities construct knowledge within a broader social order. In other words, knowledge is produced by individual groups, but those groups *have interests*. These interests are “distributed in an unequal exclusionary social order and embedded in hierarchical relations of power” (Trimbur 603). How is the learning community’s construction of knowledge affected by broader social forces?

Collaborative learning grew out of the historical *zeitgeist* of two political movements—Open Admissions and Vietnam War protests—and the urgency these movements created for Brooklyn College to address the education of a huge number of new students. The drop-in writing center, the peer tutor training course, collaborative learning—all came together quickly in a period of three years. Over four

decades, Bruffee has been able to connect his version of small group work to bodies of knowledge and social movements by asking fundamental questions about authority and interdependence in higher education. His career attests to his wide-ranging curiosity and to his perseverance in the pursuit of a line of inquiry. And his creation of a cadre of Fellows to carry on the conversation is a testament to his kindness and support in mentoring others.

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