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An Interview with Kenneth A. Bruffee

conducted by Michele A. Eodice 15 December 2007

Q: How do you feel, after over 30 years, about being invoked as “the father of peer tutoring”?

Ancient, honored, and moved.

Q: Many of us see your initial efforts at Brooklyn college as a way to save faculty from the burden of teaching writing to under-prepared students. Would you do things the same way now if just starting out with the idea?

The short answer is, no, it wasn't. And, yes I would.

Open Admissions at the City University of New York changed educational conditions at Brooklyn College and my professional life abruptly and drastically. My colleagues and I responded in different ways. Some protested. A few retired early. The rest of us tried to come to terms with it. In the four-and-a-half years I directed the writing program, every member of the English Department faculty, tenured and non-tenured, taught writing regularly. My Chair and I thought it was the thing to do. When I was hired ten years earlier, they told me that at Brooklyn College everyone in the English department teaches freshman composition. The college was proud of that. One of the best things about the place was that we all paid our dues.

When I became writing director in May, 1971, Open Admissions had been brewing for some time, but the university denied it would happen. In June, I think, the university decided it would begin open admissions in September. We had two

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months to prepare. My predecessor told me that she usually had about 30 composition classes to staff. By the end of August, the college expected 80. We scheduled more than 100.

Staffing wasn't easy. We added some volunteers from other disciplines to the English department faculty. We persuaded a few more to give it a try. We competed with other CUNY colleges for grad students, and we hired some from colleges and universities in New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island, and Upstate. It was a diverse staff with a range of backgrounds, experience, and expertise. Some of us—tenured faculty, assistant professors, instructors, adjuncts—hoped we knew what we were doing. We worked alongside the many who were starting from scratch. Everyone pleaded for help. My job was to provide it.

I called up writing directors at the other seven CUNY colleges. Mina Shaughnessy was the only one who really knew what she was doing. In teaching Open-Admissions freshman composition, I learned fast that I did not know what the phrase “under-prepared students” really meant. Few of us were aware of the complex issues obscured by the phrase. One of the first and most important things I learned was that, although obviously the two are related, teaching “under-prepared students” and teaching poorly prepared students requires different kinds of expertise.

The majority of the first two or three classes of entering students at Brooklyn College were not “under-prepared students” in the sense we have arrived at today: students who are in many ways and for many different reasons linguistically and culturally unprepared in general for college-level work. Although the university had responded, appropriately, to the vigorous, righteous demands of New York City's Black and Hispanic students, we quickly discovered that during the first few years of that program, the majority of students entering Brooklyn College were normally prepared children of the city's enormous, highly diverse, but mostly white working class.

Many of them were public high school graduates who, a year earlier, would not have met the college's entrance criteria. For many historical, social, ethnic, racial, and economic reasons, the New York public schools had gradually subordinated writing instruction to other goals and values. That should not have been news to me, but it was. Preparing students for college-level writing had been in decline throughout the United States, beginning in the 1950s. By the 1960s, the decline had become serious everywhere.

While with one hand we grappled with the needs of under-prepared students and with putting into practice what we were gradually learning about teaching them,

with the other we grappled with the rapid expansion of a more familiar necessity. It was helping a hundred intelligent, willing, but insecure writing teachers deal with thousands of entering freshmen, many of whom could write—sort of—but were a long way from being college-level writers. In 1971, these were the “burdens of teaching writing” that we shouldered. We discovered the extent of an educational problem that had been growing quietly for twenty years and that Open Admissions suddenly made evident nationally. We were confronted by the deep cultural wound of writing incompetence that is still largely unhealed even in many prestigious universities today. Evidently, we all needed much more than a quick fix.

One problem was that my way of thinking about writing did not seem to be the way my colleagues tended to think about it, or for that matter the way the teaching-of-writing profession as a whole thought about it. I understood that my colleagues were trying to teach our students all kinds of wonderful things about writing, and I valued their efforts. But it seemed to me that they were not getting to the bottom of the problem. As a result, although a lot of students did have plenty to say, most of it was unfocused, poorly organized, and incoherent.

I concluded that college-level students needed a lot more emphasis on the supporting structure of writing. How would it be, in the semester or two at our disposal, if we focused our teaching entirely on getting across only that little handful of basic moves that every writer worthy of the name learns to make instinctively, but that we did not yet seem to be securing? I consigned my dog-eared copy of Richard Lanham to the shelf. In its place, I wrote eight or ten pages, Xeroxed, called “A Short Course in Writing” and asked the faculty to give it a shot. There was also a weekly newsletter that included submissions “to the editor” along with hints-and-tips. I called it “Cadre” to give it a bit of edge. The goal was to offer embattled academics a new box of tools and give our enterprise a feeling of camaraderie. Being an English department product, all this struck some as nonsense. On the whole, it seemed to serve the purpose intended, although it did not “save faculty from the burden of teaching writing to under-prepared students.”

Q: Do you feel, in this current climate of No Child Left Behind, accountability, etc., that peer tutoring can provide the kinds of services needed to fill the gaps perceived by those who say that students are still under-prepared? Could peer tutoring be harnessed well or simply exploited as a quick fix?

Many issues are wrapped up in this question. All I have to say about six of them I will answer quickly and add a few remarks on the one I may actually know something about.

The current climate: We have to get over thinking of the “climate” of teaching writing as “current.” It seems to have begun its decline sometime in the early 1950s. That’s when I was not taught it. It has declined further since then. Neither the culture at large nor our profession has satisfactorily addressed the issue yet. For that, the nation pays a high price.

No Child Left Behind: In concept, a wonderful idea, but in practice so highly politicized, poorly thought out, and badly managed, we can only hope that someday somebody will do it right.

Accountability: The accountability movement grates on us, because it asks us to pull up our socks. It springs from two sources. One is that our country lacks consistent, reliable criteria for evaluating education at all levels nationwide. The other is that American colleges and universities are spending vast sums on new construction (some \$30 billion in 2006–07 alone, according to *College Planning & Management*), but providing little by way of plausible rationale and less by way of imaginatively improving educational quality, leaving many parents, some students, and even some faculty wondering if anyone is minding the store.

Writing peer tutors and “the under-prepared”: The state of “being under-prepared” in writing is a deeply rooted knot of complex issues. They are linguistics-, literacy-, and class-embedded, and are affected by many cultural, racial, ethnic, and economic conditions. What writing peer tutors do has no direct positive effect on those issues and conditions, although they may sometimes affect them indirectly.

Exploitation: So long as education initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and accountability remain grossly politicized, attempts to “harness” writing peer tutors for such purposes almost certainly will be misunderstood, will distort what they do, and will thereby undermine their unique educational value.

Quick fixes: Only panicked freshman and politicians hope for quick fixes.

The needed services that writing peer tutors provide: Every undergraduate who attended the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing at Penn State and had a year or so of experience as a writing peer tutor will tell you what they can do and why, what they cannot do and why, and what they could do but do not do and why. Many of them told us all that, speaking modestly, gracefully, knowledgeably, and with a great deal of well earned confidence in the sagacity of what they were saying. I remember one who talked about a student she worked with who had told her, point blank, that he expected a quick fix. Her avidly attentive audience of fellow writing peer tutors laughed uproariously; she smiled quietly, and went on with her story.

In a nutshell, what writing peer tutors do for their peers who are sufficiently prepared and willing, is introduce them to the conventions and expectations of college level writing as a means of conversational social engagement. By talking about writing, peer tutors inadvertently pass on elements and essential characteristics of the craft of human interdependence, along with a high quality of social engagement. It is the medium through which writing peer tutors inadvertently pass on their unique educational reach to their peers. That is what the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project is now demonstrating.

Few American colleges and universities today understand this. Some appear to think that writing peer tutoring is an un-academic, ethically somewhat suspect necessity to be acquired at the tip of one's fingers. They wish the whole business would just go away. Most are, so far as I know, as yet wholly unaware of the unique educational contribution to undergraduate education that writing peer tutors provide. And yet, as the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project is also beginning to show, preparing writing peer tutors well and pouring them, graduation after graduation, into welcoming schools and businesses continues to be the greatest favor the academic profession does for Americans today. Go figure.

Q: In your recent keynote at the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing you said that our work, as writing peer tutors and with them, can teach "human interdependence." Can you expand on this? For example, do you sense that there are few places on a campus where this type of experience is offered?

Understanding the characteristics, values, difficulties, and craft of human interdependence can be taught. Writing peer tutors have a role to play in that. So do the mentors of writing peer tutors.

First, the role of writing peer tutors. It would be mistake to ask writing peer tutors to set out to "teach" human interdependence. Writing peer tutors both learn and teach human interdependence unawares by practicing writing as a social activity that engages tutor and tutee. That is their role, the essence of their unique educational reach.

I have replaced "can teach human interdependence" with "teach it unawares" to remind us that we are not talking here about textbooks, lectures, and lessons. We are talking about harnessing the power of conversing with peers as a social and intellectual resource. The principle to keep in mind when we think about what writing peer tutors do is that undergraduates may listen to teachers, but they hear their peers.

The relevance of that adage is that students who hear what writing peer tutors say to them, in both word and gesture, may someday repeat it to *their* peers. If that should happen, it seems not wholly unlikely that before long peer tutoring writing might find itself in a web of John Guare's "six degrees of separation," through which, remarkably, writing peer tutors would seem to have been getting the point across to quite a few. Unawares.

Which brings me to the role of writing peer tutor mentors. There are three steps they can take to promote the characteristics, values, difficulties, and craft of human interdependence. Assuming that the undergraduates and writing peer tutor mentors I met at the Penn State conference constituted a reliable sample, the first step for writing peer tutor mentors to take is to keep right on doing what they have been doing so well for 25 years and more. Without that, nothing else happens.

The second step, now equally important, is to understand *how* writing peer tutors teach human interdependence unawares. Writing peer tutor mentors, collectively, can begin that exploration of new ways to understand better the unique educational reach of peer tutoring writing, perhaps in part by tapping sympathetic colleagues locally in disciplines such as anthropology, group dynamics, and others. They can learn how conversation works as a social and intellectual resource that engages students as the medium for learning to think reasonably, discerningly, and intelligibly. One way to begin finding out how all that happens is to be observant, discreetly noticing precisely and in as fine detail as possible the nature of the process as it appears (and sometimes does not) every day.

The third step is for writing peer tutor mentors to begin finding new ways to explain more boldly, positively, and definitively what they are learning about the educational reach of writing peer tutors. Doing that requires working inter-disciplinarily outside writing centers, beyond what are likely to be the usual academic terrain. The immediate goal is to convince college administrators, faculty, the disciplines (ours included), the education establishment, students' parents, and the general public of the reality, validity, and educational significance of what writing peer tutors do. In the long run, the goal is to reestablish writing as a culturally and therefore educationally essential resource.

Encouraging colleges to develop a relevant curriculum is part of that third step. Understanding human interdependence has played a minor role—if any—in most American college education. I am not aware of colleges that offer a curriculum in the characteristics, craft, and conventions of human interdependence. If they exist, I hope they will tell us about it. One effect such studies can have is that writing peer tutors begin recognizing similarities between what they are doing and the futures

they aspire to. In turn, some of our colleagues whose lives already play out on larger stages might be more inclined to recognize in the educational reach of writing peer tutors the course that their own aspirations have taken.

Q: Like you and many others, I believe that the writing center offers a rare and authentic opportunity for our peer tutors; they learn so much by working with other students. Also, as you mentioned in your talk at Penn State, “helping undergraduate students learn to write well is as important to a college as green grass on the quadrangle, and it usually costs a lot less to maintain.” Given all that, why do you think writing centers continue to struggle to show the effects of that learning on both peer tutors and their tutees, and why do writing centers still struggle for sustainability in the competitive campus environment? What can we do to demonstrate the value of peer tutoring programs to our administrations?

Equating writing peer tutors with quadrangle grass is an extravagant metaphor. It represents the state of things as they are at our colleges today.

Colleges spend a lot of money on conspicuous quadrangles, because their administrators, faculty, alumni, students, and students’ parents respond positively to a vast expanse of carefully barbered grass. It represents the institution’s pride, self confidence, achievement, and vigor. Colleges spend as little as possible on writing centers and make them as inconspicuous as they can, because administrators, faculty, alumni, students, and students’ parents respond negatively to what they perceive as a shameful necessity, a blot on the honor of the college to which they regularly send large checks, a tell-tale sign of students’ limited achievement as writers, and perhaps a reminder of their own. It is not just that colleges do not understand and respect the unique educational reach of writing peer tutors. It is also that the schools and businesses who welcome the acumen and expertise of writing peer tutors have not yet acknowledged that value forcefully in public. As a result, writing centers are still the elephant in the quadrangle.

It is possible that we all might be able to help rectify that situation a bit by acknowledging that we share some responsibility for it. Most of us notice that we tend sometimes, as a community and understandably, to call into question the nature and value of what we do, accepting “struggle” as our means, our goal being to “sustain” ourselves. We might consider instead pointing out that it is educational institutions, unable to turn out literate graduates reliably however luxurious and pricey the buildings they erect, who struggle to sustain public confidence in the quality of the education they provide.

We notice also that we tend sometimes not to express ourselves quite as well in writing as we are capable of when we address our colleagues at home and elsewhere.

I suspect many of us feel a bit timid (I sure do) asking others to take a look at what we're working on. But we also know that every one of us is capable, with a little help from our friends, of writing memos and articles that are simply expressed, jargon-free, and practiced for economy. And each of us is ready to read a colleague's draft sympathetically, constructively, and tactfully, and even, whenever possible, inject a quick shot of self-confidence. Or, lacking a handy colleague, ask a writing peer tutor. Why not?

There is still another way to invite the elephant to vacate the premises. It might even be fun. It is to organize communities of writing peer tutor alumni to consider the tendency of administrators, faculty, alumni, students, and students' parents to regard writing peer tutoring as reflecting shamefully on the college, its students, and perhaps the students' parents. And consider also how timidly, if at all, businesses admit the importance of writing ability to the success of what they do. Then, let alumni groups figure out what to do about it. The more different backgrounds and talents involved the better. A place to begin might be the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project's rich stable of purebreds now out to pasture. Eventually, undergraduate writing peer tutors might be drawn in, too. That would keep up to date the effort's information, perspective, and undergraduate lingo, and it would give the tutors access to the post-college experience of veterans, some of whom may turn out to be people with connections.

The message to convey is that what writing peer tutors do is central to every college education. Writing is as important as physics and bio-chem, psychology and sociology, English, art, and classics. None would exist without writing, because these and many other fields of endeavor are handicapped by the inability of 80% of American college graduates to write effectively at a college level. To convey that idea, knowledgeable mentors and supporters of writing peer tutors should undertake serious conceptual "rebranding" of the unique educational reach of writing peer tutors. If that sounds like stooping to Madison Avenue, so be it. The cause is just. This is time to assert the unrecognized unique significance and goals of well-trained writing peer tutors.

NOTE

Sources that help move conversation about the social relevance of writing peer tutors in interesting directions are listed on the keynote Works Cited page ("What Being A Writing Peer Tutor Can Do for You," p. 10 of this issue). Others I can recommend are Michael P. Farrell, *Collaborative Circles: Friendship dynamics and Creative Work* (U Chicago, 2001), Duncan J. Watts, *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (Norton, 2003), and some of Martin A. Nowak's work, such as in *Scientific American* (June 1995, and January 2002). I hope readers who discover other books and articles of interest will let all of us know about them. Coming to terms with sources such as these in reading groups can be highly rewarding. Readers so inclined might consider organizing one (local and/or Web connected) for discussing issues the sources may raise—Ken Bruffee.