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Paper Trails: The Brooklyn College Institute for Training Peer Writing Tutors and the Composition Archive

by John Trimbur

Rhetoric and composition, as a new academic field, has been obsessed with its own history. Not that such a history is waiting out there to be found. I'd put it another way—namely that the activity of charting the history of the field has been a strategy to bring it into being, as we claim ancestors, lines of descent, patterns of development, intellectual affiliations, and teleologies. Readers will recognize the familiar mapping procedures—taxonomies from James Berlin and Lester Faigley, Stephen North's categories, Bruce Horner's terms of work, and Robert J. Connor's composition-rhetoric, as well as John Brereton's documentary history of the origins of composition studies, Sharon Crowley's *Composition and the University*, and Patricia Bizzell, Bruce Herzberg, and Nedra Reynolds' *Bedford Bibliography*.

Without this kind of scholarship, the study and teaching of writing would be difficult to imagine as an organized inquiry with boundaries, purposes, important contributions, a shared (and contested) terminology, and a set of pressing questions. These studies typically rely in part on archival sources—journals and books, old syllabi, textbooks, unpublished dissertations, university and college catalogs, lecture notes, writing assignments, student papers, examinations, committee reports, national reports, the popular press, and so on. The very idea of an archive, of course, has a certain antiquarian aura about it, of unsuspected treasures hidden away in someone's attic, remnants of the past left at the back of a file cabinet, old letters bundled together in a desk drawer (or emails saved). It's as though the archive is a repository of the past, beckoning toward the present—find me, unlock my secrets

About the Author

John Trimbur is Professor of Writing, Literature & Publishing and Director of the First-Year Writing Program at Emerson College. He was a fellow in the Brooklyn College Institute for Training Peer Writing Tutors in 1980 and has published a number of award-winning articles, including "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" which won the National Writing Center Association scholarship award in 1987, and, with Bruce Horner, "English Only and U.S. College Composition," which won the Richard Braddock award in 2003.

and truths. At least, that's the way it feels to handle archival materials, to be transported into their time, to discover their particular moments of articulation.

The revelations of the archive, however, do not come from simply witnessing the past: they are made as much as found, the result of the researcher's purposes and the lines of inquiry that turn archival material into evidence. But archives can be suggestive in their own right and point to questions that might otherwise go unasked. This, at any rate, is my experience reading and thinking about the archives of Kenneth A. Bruffee's Brooklyn College Institute for Training Peer Writing Tutors, which are housed in the National Archives of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island. For me, these archives bring to mind quite pointedly the role of professional gatherings, such as seminars, conferences, colloquia, workshops, and summer institutes, in the formation of composition studies. The standard histories, as I've noted, have mapped the field in terms of theoretical camps and general approaches to the study and teaching of writing. This has proceeded largely as a history of ideas, methods, and research strategies. What institutes, colloquia, seminars, and other kinds of gatherings put us in touch with, however, is the social texture of professional life, how the field has differentiated into socio-intellectual groupings of co-thinkers and how these intellectual affiliations get materialized in pedagogical and programmatic forms.

David Bartholomae makes this point in "Around 1980," when he notes how Richard Young's year-long NEH seminar in 1978-79 (and the alternative reading group within it of Berlin, Lisa Ede, Victor Vitanza, and others) provided the context in which the journal *Pre/Text* began as an intellectual project and network of co-thinkers. In *Situating Composition*, Ede holds that composition history has for the most part ignored the role that seminars and institutes such as Young's seminar, Janice Lauer's Rhetoric Seminar, and Bruffee's Brooklyn College Institute have played in shaping both the intellectual life of the field and the formation of individual careers.

It's easy enough to think of the Brooklyn College Institute, which started in that momentous year 1980, and subsequently ran, in one form or another, for almost ten years, as the forum where Bruffee worked out a version of social construction, based on Rorty, Fish, and Kuhn, as a rationale for peer tutoring and collaborative learning. You can trace this line of intellectual work through the articles Bruffee published in the 1980s, along with articles those of us in the Institute published during that time on the contradictions and politics of peer tutoring and collaborative learning. This work has been recorded and recognized in the public record of composition—in outstanding article awards and appearance in anthologies and on reading

lists for peer tutors in writing and graduate students in rhetoric and composition. I am grateful I had a chance to participate in this moment, but my interest here, in thinking about the Brooklyn College Institute and the composition archive, is to downshift—to try to get to a level of analysis about what enabled us to get together in the first place and then to disseminate the work of the Brooklyn College Institute in pedagogical and programmatic practice.

Consider, to start with, a common kind of programmatic practice, writing grant proposals. To put on a peer tutoring institute for college professors, Ken Bruffee wrote a proposal to the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), a major federally-funded grant program with offices in Washington, DC. When FIPSE accepted the proposal, in order to qualify, all of us who were interested in attending the Institute had to write letters of application. According to the terms of the FIPSE grant proposal, acceptance in the Brooklyn College Institute was based not only on the merits of individual applicants; we also had to secure financial support from our home institutions and a commitment to a credit-bearing course for peer tutors, as preconditions for participation. In this regard, dissemination of the Brooklyn Plan of peer tutoring was built into the very design of the Institute, rather than being just a possible result. These conditions of acceptance demanded a buy-in from our home institutions that, in turn, gave Institute participants a certain leverage to enact educational change that at least some of us could not have managed on our own.

The second feature that calls for notice is how Ken secured FIPSE funding for five-week summer institutes in two consecutive years, with fifteen participants each summer, followed by a two-week consolidation conference in the third summer for selected participants. The model Ken devised was crucial to the emergence, over time, from within the Institute of a core group of participants who came to identify themselves as co-workers and co-thinkers engaged in a common project. This grouping began to form in the first summer but took on a more defined shape by the end of the second summer, when a handful of us from the first summer visited the Institute in its final week and more or less merged with a grouping from within the second summer Institute. If anything, this became an annual rhythm for much of the 1980s, spending the academic year trying to put collaborative learning into practice and then returning each summer to New York to reflect on that experience, to complicate and problematize it, to be sure, but also to make plans about how to disseminate and institutionalize collaborative learning theory and practice. A second FIPSE grant, which Carol Stanger received for a collaborative learning institute based at Asnuntuck Community College, grew out of the original

Brooklyn College Institute and helped provide support and further momentum for this shared work, including a one-day conference at Yale in 1984 called “Collaborative Learning and the Reinterpretation of Knowledge,” where the featured speakers were Ken, Peter Elbow, Charles Keil, and Elaine Maimon, with Stanley Fish as the respondent to papers.

All of which leads to another neglected practice in composition studies, namely the faculty development workshop, which is entered into the composition archive haphazardly in the form of flyers, workshop handouts, and other ephemeral texts. This humble and taken-for-granted genre became in many respects the most important means of disseminating the version of peer tutoring and collaborative learning developed in the Brooklyn College Institute. It was codified as the apparently simple task of asking workshop participants to work in small groups to interpret a short passage from a poem or work of non-fiction and then to consider the dynamics of learning that had taken place. As Ken told us, give a seemingly simple task of interpretation and let workshop participants make it complex as a demonstration of the educational value of collaborative learning. As we became increasingly adept and confident in talking about the rhetorical negotiations and the crises of authority and intimacy that we saw taking place in collaborative learning, we increasingly identified ourselves, as socio-intellectual groupings typically do, in contrast to other currents of pedagogical theory and practice, which we dubbed “mere group work” and considered mainly to be a teaching technique rather than a program for educational change. In the 1980s and 1990s, Bruffee (and other Institute members) worked tirelessly to demonstrate the educational potential of collaborative learning, in what we called the “demo-demo,” at colleges and universities, at 4C’s pre-convention workshops, and in faculty development institutes at Bard College, the University of Chicago, and elsewhere.

Finally, there is another neglected genre of the archive that offers a particularly rich source of understanding composition history—and that’s the evaluator’s report. As it turned out, Ken asked Peter Elbow to be one of the evaluators of the Brooklyn College Institute. In the second summer, 1981, Peter spent a couple days observing the Institute and then wrote an evaluator’s report that, along with Bruffee’s 42-page letter of response, is, to my mind, as interesting as the much-heralded Elbow-Bartholomae debate. Elbow’s report, written “as it were, directly and somewhat personally to Ken,” contains observations on the Institute and then a number of remarkable “speculations” about the values of spoken and written peer feedback, the relation of collaborative learning to knowledge and to the authority of the teacher, and the *Short Course* form of propositions and reasons.

In both Peter's report and Ken's letter, there is a wonderful immediacy and a strong sense of two people trying to think things through. In this regard, the Elbow-Bruffee exchange is quite unlike the Elbow-Bartholomae debate, which began in public at 4Cs and subsequently found its way into a published version, with staked-out positions and differing approaches. In contrast, to read the exchange between Peter and Ken is to feel present at emergent moments of articulation, where two people are working together to sort out things that are difficult and perplexing. This is evident, for example, in the discussion of collaborative learning and the teacher's authority. Peter suggests that at times Ken sounds like he is saying that as teachers let go of some authority, students accordingly can take on more—a problematic model, Peter says, where “there is a constant amount of authority available in any given situation” which may be redistributed in what's basically a zero-sum game (8). Ken replies that if he said something along those lines, he shouldn't have, that, in fact, the “very reverse is the case. Collaborative learning helps members of the learning group invest authority in each other, so that they gain the capacity to divest the leader of some of his or her authority” (4). The recognition here, as Ken works it out, is that teachers can't relinquish authority; in fact to do so is just another way of maintaining control. When Peter asks, “What mode of leadership is most appropriate for CL [collaborative learning]?” (12), the answer Ken gives is leadership “capable of helping people invest authority in each other” (5)—and as Ken's remarks in other parts of his letter to Peter indicate, this may have as much to do with overcoming authority-dependence on participants' part as with divesting the leader of authority.

In 1981, when I read the Elbow-Bruffee exchange, which Ken circulated to Institute participants, I felt I was privileged to overhear experienced writing teachers (and esteemed mentors) talk about their agreements and differences, trying to get some traction on pedagogical concerns that appear more often in informal teacher talk than in journal articles. Three issues stand out: Peter's suggestion that teachers should model collaboration; Peter's “itch to try to collaborate with those I lead” (14); and the amount of time it takes for collaborative learning to “work.”

On the first question, Peter says, “[w]hat seems right is a practice I've evolved of using myself as model or guinea pig whenever I want to introduce a difficult or potentially threatening procedure” (13), whether it's freewriting or putting a piece of writing up for reader response. Ken's reply has a number of dimensions. He acknowledges Peter's point that because collaboration in academic work, especially in the humanities, is so rare (or was rare in 1981) that it's often botched, “some sort of model seems useful” (22). The difference, though, is that, in Ken's view, the

teacher, because he or she is not a peer with the students, cannot in any realistic sense model collaboration among peers but will only wind up modeling “how a person in authority might work with non-peers” (23). There are, however, models teachers can draw on by “asking students to model collaboration themselves on carefully designed classroom tasks” and by examining the “collaboration people undertake successfully outside the classroom,” where students do have a good deal of experience collaborating in “sports, games, camping, fixing cars, making films, organizing dances, organizing election campaigns” (22).

The second issue—of whether teachers should collaborate with students—is really a variation of the first issue. Peter’s “itch” to collaborate comes from a desire for “new models of leadership in which there is more authority for members but also more support for and less alienation of leaders” (14). Peter presents this question as a matter of “genuine perplexity” because he acknowledges at the same time that his desire to join the group as a collaborator may in fact conceal or suppress the authority he actually holds and inhibit the group from resolving its own complicated feelings of dependence on authority and consequent rebellion against conditions of dependence. From his side, Ken sees his role as more of a “manager” than collaborator. The teacher’s job, as Ken presents it, is to design collaborative learning activities that precipitate a crisis of authority on the students’ part that they can resolve productively in order to negotiate the crisis of intimacy with peers and thereby turn their energy toward working with others on academic tasks. As Ken says, “rather than trying to sweep away the classroom structure that students have been used to for the last twelve or fourteen years, or try to talk them out of it, I leave it in place until I have helped them learn another structure to take its place, a structure that feels just as safe and works just as well” (26).

The third issue—the time it takes for collaborative learning to take hold—follows. Ken quotes a passage from Peter’s report:

Strongly directed CL seems to work best and yet people need to learn to function in weakly directed and nondirected CL....[This] suggests the need for a curriculum that helps people move gradually through all these kinds....People should start with safe and circumscribed and well-defined exercises in collaboration and gradually be moved along to where they had to work more out on their own. Not just collaborative tasks to do but situations where the task is to figure out what needs doing. Situations where there isn’t so much safety net of outside authority. And finally, they would be faced with the need to collaborate where no one at all was directing. (Elbow 12)

Ken says he quoted “this passage at length because I am grateful to have the process formulated so well” (18). This is indeed the trajectory that collaborative learning points to. And yet, as Ken continues, the question remains about how long all this might take, whether in undergraduate education or in a faculty summer institute, not to mention a one-day faculty workshop on collaborative learning. Ken sees Peter as underestimating the time needed to work through “the complexities of the process and the depth of our resistance to it” (18). Peter is more impatient and wants to get on with it. Ken is more measured. But perhaps the telling point is the weight of the past on teachers and students and how they will deal, in the words of Adrienne Rich, with “the influence of failed institutions . . . when we set out to create anything new” (qtd. in Bruffee 18).

My feeling is that the Brooklyn College Institute provided us a space to assess the “influence of failed institutions” in a practical way and to reimagine what teaching and learning might be. You will have to judge whether the versions of peer tutoring and collaborative learning that the Brooklyn College Institute participants went on to produce and disseminate actually constitute a way out of the dilemmas of teaching and learning that we have inherited.

This issue of *The Writing Center Journal* is an indication of how a particular socio-intellectual formation in composition has remained intact, vital, and conversant. I don’t want to think this is one of those *festschriften* that acolytes offer to their master. From one angle, the paper trail of the Institute—and what we might call Bruffeeism—runs out in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In composition literature, the topics “collaboration” and “collaborative learning” peaked and were incorporated into work on collaborative writing (Ede and Lunsford; Forman), studies of collaboration in professional writing (Blyer and Thralls), and radical pedagogy (Leverenz; Trimbur), as well as Mara Holt’s historical work and Harvey Kail’s essay on narrative knowledge in *Short Course*. Ken moved out of composition to make the higher education readership his audience in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge* and occasional articles. Nonetheless, at least as I see it, this is just a sign that Bruffee-inspired collaborative learning and peer tutoring have been so thoroughly integrated into composition teaching that it now goes without saying. If anything, we’re living on Bruffee’s legacy, now taken for granted, and the network of Brooklyn College Institute participants he inspired.

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