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Foreword to Bruffee, Kenneth A. A Short Course in Writing: Composition, Collaborative Learning, and Constructive Reading

4th ed. New York: Pearson, 2007 (reprinted by permission).

by Harvey Kail and John Trimbur

Kenneth A. Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing* provides a good occasion to ask what makes a textbook in rhetoric and composition a classic. The fact that Bruffee's book is among the first to appear in the Longman Classics in Rhetoric and Composition series cannot be attributed, after all, to its commercial success. In his review of the original manuscript of *A Short Course*, Richard Beal, the most prominent English editor at the time, told Paul O'Connell, who published the first edition at Winthrop in 1972, that Bruffee could either alter the book and sell a lot of copies or publish the book as is and make history.[1] What Beal predicted has indeed come to pass. As *A Short Course* appeared in subsequent editions (the 2nd from Winthrop in 1980; the 3rd from Little Brown in 1985; and the 4th from HarperCollins in 1993), it has influenced, far out of proportion to its sales, the actual practices of writing instruction and, more broadly, of educational reform in U.S. college composition.

If anything, it is the professional appreciation of Bruffee's distinct combination of practical rhetoric and collaborative learning that has made *A Short Course* a classic. A generation of writing teachers, writing center directors, writing program administrators, and writing theorists, not to mention other textbook authors, have affirmed the value of *A Short Course* as not just another textbook but instead a way of thinking about writing and liberal education. *A Short Course* belongs to a subgenre we might call the "short rhetoric," a guide to writing with a point of view, poised precariously between a professional book and a textbook. Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*, William E. Coles's *The Plural I*, and Ann Berthoff's *Forming, Thinking, Writing* are good examples. These books make no pretense to being comprehensive, like the full-service rhetorics such as McCrimmon's *Writing With a Purpose* or *The St Martin's Guide*. Instead, the short rhetorics are meant to be edifying, to offer a lesson about how writing might be taught and learned.

Without the apparatus, manuals, and ancillaries of the long rhetoric, *A Short Course* addresses students and teachers simultaneously and transparently, as joint participants and necessary components of educational change in the composition classroom. The task that *A Short Course* took on in the early 1970s was defined by a nearly visceral sense that traditional forms of teaching writing were in crisis

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because they are hierarchical, atomizing, authoritarian, disabling, and just plain ineffective. For Bruffee, the problem was one not just of jettisoning the worn-out models of the past but more important of designing more adequate and enabling forms of classroom life. The task, as Bruffee begins to develop it with the first edition of *A Short Course*, involves resituating the participants in writing classrooms by redescribing the authority of the teacher and reorganizing the way students work together with texts. Like the other short rhetorics, *A Short Course* is a partisan book, a call to change the social relations of reading and writing—to materialize new meanings for literacy in the first-year composition course.

Recognition of *A Short Course* can be seen quite concretely in the way Bruffee's characteristic devices have been assimilated into writing pedagogy—short forms of writing based on propositions and reasons; descriptive outlines; reading aloud; sequenced exercises in written peer evaluation. Part of the appeal of *A Short Course* (and consequently one of the sources of its influence) is the ease with which the assignments and exercises can be lifted and put into practice. Many writing teachers have read *A Short Course*, learned from it, and used its materials, whether they ever actually assigned the book or not. In its 30-year history, *A Short Course* has circulated in a variety of contexts—in the classrooms and syllabi of individual teachers, to be sure, but also, more programmatically, in the meetings of CUNY writing faculty during open admissions in the early 1970s, the Brooklyn Plan as a model of peer tutor training, the Brooklyn Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors of the 1980s, the collaborative learning workshops Bruffee has done at conferences and at colleges and universities, and the professional networks of writing teachers and theorists who read Bruffee's articles in *College English* and *Liberal Education* as an indispensable departure point in understanding the connections between collaborative learning and composition. In writing center circles, where it originated, *A Short Course* has become a standard manual for training peer tutors. To put it another way, the status of *A Short Course* as a classic in rhetoric and composition can be traced to its uses, its infiltration of practice and its influence on the underlying theories that enable writing instruction, peer tutoring, and writing program design.

This did not happen all at once. It is important to see the editions of *A Short Course* as a work in progress, a part of Bruffee's larger project to understand the potentialities of mutual aid and associated learning and to link this understanding to the development of rhetorical judgment. The activities, assignments, and exercises in *A Short Course* have remained remarkably consistent over the four editions. What can be seen unfolding rather is Bruffee's clarification of the meaning of collaborative learning for the teaching of writing. As we will see, *A Short Course* pro-

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vided Bruffee with a laboratory to codify his experiments with peer group learning and a forum to explain and disseminate the model of collaborative learning he advocates.

The genius of *A Short Course in Writing* is in the unique relationship it establishes between formal writing exercises and rigorous peer review tasks. When students move together through these collaborative exercises, they become better writers by learning to help others in the class become better writers. Of course this is an easy claim to make but not necessarily so easy to accomplish. Teaching students to earn trust and critical judgment from each other is complex and fraught. However, in the clarity and purposefulness of its writing and reading tasks and in its accumulated wisdom about collaborative learning, *A Short Course* comes as close to a curricular machine for producing educational mutual aid among students as we have ever seen. Although specific *Short Course* exercises can and frequently have been lifted out of the text for other purposes, *A Short Course* is best used by following the sequence of assignments that unfold over time in order for students to learn not only the standard forms of academic and public discourse but also to learn them by becoming competent readers of each other's prose and articulate, tactful critics of each other's writing.

The joining of a practical rhetoric with a collaborative learning pedagogy is an interesting story in itself, one that is both specific to Bruffee and germane to higher education reform in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Students and faculty were experiencing at the time the drama of the anti-Vietnam war and civil rights movements on their own campuses, as grassroots movements were seeking to democratize higher education through open admissions. Bruffee became director of first year composition at Brooklyn College in April, 1971. In June, against a backdrop of city-wide student protests, the City University of New York opened its doors to all New Yorkers who had earned a high school diploma. Seemingly overnight, students who had never had the opportunity for higher education—or the educational preparation and academic success traditional to the highly selective Brooklyn College campus—were streaming in the door. Enrollments jumped from 14,000 to 34,000 in just three years (Hawkes 3). Faced with 108 divisions of Freshman English and a staff as unprepared as he was for the task, Bruffee acknowledges, "We just muddled. We didn't know what we were doing. That's the truth. We didn't know" (Interview March 2003). Researching, writing, and revising the early editions of *A Short Course* became Bruffee's way out of this educational and cultural muddle.

The innovative notion that students should and could play a systematic role in each other's education as writers and thinkers came into *A Short Course* at just this time of ferment and change in American higher education. One of the most important early influences on the development of *A Short Course* came from a student on Bruffee's own Brooklyn College campus. Peter Amato, an undergraduate, was running a peer counseling service to help other students resolve personal problems related to finances, housing, health care and other issues that affected their matriculation. Bruffee remembers that "there was something about this that began to muddle in my head" (Interview March 2003). If students could help other students with serious life issues such as financing their college educations or getting their health needs addressed, surely, he reasoned, they could help other students write a paper that makes a point and defends it. Thus inspired and instructed by a student, Bruffee began training undergraduates at Brooklyn College to tutor their peers in writing, teaching the first peer tutor training course in writing in the U.S.

Bruffee adapted an early, mimeographed version of *A Short Course* for the purpose, incorporating the brief argument forms that he had been experimenting with since the 1960's as the foundation and practical rhetoric of his course. Proposition and two reasons, strawman and one reason, Nestorian order, concession—these are the infamous *Short Course* forms that appear in the text as schematic hook and ladder diagrams, outlining the shape that the argument should follow: proposition here, reasons there, three paragraphs, no conclusion. Bruffee has stood by these argument forms steadfastly through all the editions of *A Short Course* not only because they are "basic, useful and variable forms" of public discourse but also because they "make collaborative learning easier to organize" (*Short Course* 6). In the course of a semester's study and writing, *Short Course* forms do, indeed, create a communal, intellectual space within which collaborative learning can be experienced. Through their repetition and evolving complexity, their clarity and rigor, they become the scaffolding by which students master the tricky demands of learning together rather than apart.

The peer review assignments Bruffee developed over the course of the early editions of *A Short Course* call on students to help each other by writing and conversing in terms of the unity, coherence, development, mechanics, and style of their writing, a method of work-shopping writing that Peter Elbow would later call "criterion-based feedback" (240). The difference is that in Bruffee's peer tutor training course, the students were not simply giving each other "feedback"; they were immersing themselves in the complex experience of learning composition together. As the formal writing tasks in *A Short Course* become more complex and more chal-

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lenging, the collaborative learning exercises in turn become more thorough and evaluative, moving students together from description and analysis of form, to evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of argument, and finally to making and explaining practical suggestions for revision. The entire progression calls not only for increasing competence in analytical precision and judgment but the development of tact and diplomacy, as well—the kind of conversation that teaches students "the skills and partnership" of interdependence.

By 1972, when the first edition of *A Short Course* was published, Bruffee had come to the "tentative but not very original conclusion" that it was necessary to "redefine the roles of teacher and student" in order that young people might "recapture themselves" from the "docility and dependence bequeathed to them by American schooling" (*Short Course* xii). Bruffee found a model by which to reorganize this vital relationship between "those that want to learn and those whose calling it is to teach" (Interview March 2003) at Columbia University's Graduate School of Social Work, where he enrolled in classes in the early 1970's to investigate more systematically the way people learn in groups. At Columbia he studied with William Schwartz, a leading theorist and practitioner of mutual aid groups. The predominant model of social work in the 1960s and 1970s assumed the social worker as a case manager who worked one-to-one with individual clients helping them solve individual problems. Schwartz was proposing and documenting a model that focused instead on the social worker as a mediator interacting with small groups, rather than with individuals, to help the group develop mutual aid. Schwartz and his colleagues were committed to extending the value of small group social work to settings such as prisons, hospitals, and union halls where the notion of mutual aid might find fertile ground.

Bruffee began constructing a role for the teacher in the composition classroom similar to that assigned to the social worker in the small group paradigm. Rather than the teacher instructing the class as an aggregate of individuals, addressing each student on a one-to-one basis (even when that one-to-one relationship is embedded in a lecture or classroom discussion), the teacher in *A Short Course* becomes a task designer, a community organizer, a referee of difference and dissent, a mediator among the students and between the students and the academy. Rather than an occasion for lectures or class discussion, the class itself becomes an alternative social structure within the institution, constructing a transitional subgroup of peers that students can rely on as they go through "the risky process of replacing dependence on the teacher's authority with confidence in their own authority as writers and critical readers" (Instructor's Manual 9).

Throughout the 1970's, Bruffee was reading the work of educational theorists and practitioners who were also engaged in organizing people to learn from each other, and he was synthesizing and incorporating their ideas into *A Short Course*. What is striking about Bruffee's sources and his thinking at this early stage of *A Short Course* is how much they prefigure themes in his later work. Bruffee began to conceptualize collaborative learning by drawing on John Dewey's interest in reforming the atomized, asocial character of traditional education and his retrospective critique that progressive education had abandoned the traditional authority of teachers and the school without devising an alternative enabling structure to replace it. From *Anatomy of Judgment*, M.L.J. Abercrombie's study of small groups learning diagnostic skills in medical school, Bruffee picked up the idea that peer learning is best suited not so much to learning new material but instead to developing evaluative judgment and intellectual maturity. Another early influence was Edwin Mason's *Collaborative Learning*, where Bruffee found the term for his new writing pedagogy, along with an early suggestion that was to occupy his work more and more, the idea that not only learning but knowledge itself was social. Vygotsky's notion of thought as "inner speech," the internalized conversation with others, pointed further, for Bruffee, to the inescapably social character of writing and learning.

By the time the third edition of *A Short Course* was published in 1985, Bruffee had consolidated a theoretical grounding, and, in a telling move, he brought his explanation of collaborative learning forward from the back of the book, where it had been residing, to the very front, where it appeared in a revised and significantly expanded version as the doorway to the text, to "writing as a collaborative and social act." Two new and, in some measure, interdependent influences now seem crucial to this development of *A Short Course*. The first was Bruffee's invention of the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors. With support from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education and the City University of New York, the Institute brought together fifteen writing center directors in both 1980 and 1981 to disseminate the Brooklyn Plan, Bruffee's model for training and using peer tutors. The idea was to train a cohort of thirty young college and university writing instructors to return to their home institutions and use *A Short Course* to train peer writing tutors.

Lisa Ede notes that composition history has often neglected the role institutes and seminars such as Bruffee's Brooklyn Institute, Richard Young's NEH seminar, and Janice Lauer's Rhetoric Seminar have played in shaping the intellectual life of the field through the formation of professional networks and individual careers. As part of the first group of fifteen in the Brooklyn Institute, and relatively new to writ-

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ing centers and to composition studies in 1980, we can attest to how this works. For five weeks we followed the syllabus for training peer tutors in the second edition of *A Short Course*: we explored topics through structured conversation; wrote descriptive outlines, peer reviews and author's responses; read drafts aloud; turned our papers into Bruffee for his commentary; revised. Sessions led by Alex Gitterman, a colleague of William Schwartz at Columbia, met twice a week to introduce Institute fellows to social group work theory and practice and to examine the Institute itself as a working experiment in developing a mutual aid group. The intensity we experienced as peers in a rigorous collaborative learning environment generated struggles with our feelings and attitudes toward the authority of the teacher and the intimacy and frustrations of small group learning. It also produced new articulations of what it might mean for teaching composition in the academy if writing tasks were systematically immersed in the social relations of peers. Bruffee takes up these themes that so stirred the Institute, presenting them in new and clarified terms in the Introduction to the third edition of *A Short Course.*

The second, related influence that shaped the third edition was Bruffee's synthesis of social constructionist thought and his application of its non-foundationalist assumptions to the teaching of writing. Bruffee had for some time been reading in the history of science, anthropology, psychology, composition, and literary theory, trying, in his own interdisciplinary way, to find a language to help him explain collaborative learning and its unsettling relationship to knowledge. In the Brooklyn Institute, we came to think of this synthesis of ideas as the triad Kuhn/Fish/Rorty. From Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Bruffee gleaned the idea that scientific knowledge was a social construct, not the discovery of what is really out there but instead what can be ratified by a consensus of knowledgeable peers. From Stanley's Fish's *Is There a Text in this Class?*, Bruffee found confirmation of the notion that knowledge is more of a process of acculturation to an "interpretive community" than an individual encounter with an unmediated reality or rationality. These, and other related writers and ideas, which Bruffee described in a series of influential articles in the early 1980s, all came into bold relief for Bruffee when he discovered Richard Rorty.

As Bruffee tells the story, he was enrolled in Professor Reuben Abel's course in epistemology at the New School (it is typical of Bruffee to enroll in a course or courses when he is researching something, testimony to his willingness to educate himself in public) when "some guy came in [to the class] waving this green book and saying to the professor 'What about this?'" (Interview March 2003). The book was *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. From Rorty, Bruffee discovered the lan-

guage through which he could at last respond to the criticism that collaborative learning, while useful perhaps as a means of social support, amounted, as a matter of intellectual development, to the blind leading the blind. The problem, Bruffee learned by reading Rorty, was with the way we think about knowledge. In the metaphor of the "Mirror of Nature" that has dominated Western philosophy, Rorty holds, knowledge is conceived of as a reflection of the world inspected by the "Inner Eye" of the knowing self. In Rorty's view, however, we should drop the optic metaphors and their claim to establish the foundation of knowledge in the relation between the individual mind and the world. Instead, Rorty says, we can better "understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation" (170). Accordingly, for Bruffee, if knowledge is constructed by the discursive practices of communities of people and learning thereby involves joining new communities, then we can stop worrying about the blind leading the blind. Collaborative learning makes sense precisely because it provides the conditions to negotiate the terms of understanding and the changes in social allegiances and affiliations involved in learning.

For Bruffee, the writing classroom has always been a forum for educational change, and *A Short Course*, with its elaborate pedagogy of collaborative learning, is the first composition text to develop the value of peer influence over an entire semester course. Nonetheless, for some writing teachers in the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of the process movement, Bruffee's short forms of writing and his reliance on propositions and reasons looked like nothing so much as the current-traditional rhetoric of Sheridan Baker and the five-paragraph theme. The boxy visual representations of the short forms seemed damning evidence of a formalism that threatened individuality, creativity, and inventiveness. By the early 1980s, however, with the "social turn" in composition, Bruffee's work took on new dimensions as a widely-cited instance of "social-constructionist" theory (Faigley) and "social-epistemic" rhetoric (Berlin) and an exemplary pedagogy for writing teachers and theorists seeking alternatives to the personal essay in the public reasoning of academic discourse. Not surprisingly, Bruffee's non-foundationalist rhetoric was seized on by the social wing of composition as a conceptual counter to expressivist and cognitivist currents in composition. Still, for all its well-recognized influence on the composition theory of the 1980s, Bruffee's practical rhetoric cannot be neatly folded into the debates of the day, for it grows as much out of Bruffee's understanding of the aims of liberal education. Bruffee's non-foundationalist rhetoric abandons Enlightenment epistemologies, to be sure, but holds, in crucial aspects, to the liberal tradition of enlightened citizen-rhetors who have freed themselves from what

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he calls the "allure of the status quo," the unwillingness to question and to change. Inspired by Dewey and the movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bruffee's practical rhetoric is meant to teach the "way out" of docility, obedience, and unexamined dependence on authority through the use of reason in public. This is the "undefined work of freedom" that remains, for Foucault, the enduring legacy of the Enlightenment, as exemplified by Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment": the active sense, as Foucault puts it, that the "process that releases us from the status of 'immaturity'" involves "a modification of the prevailing relations linking will, authority, and the use of reason" (305). The achievement of the practical rhetoric in *A Short Course* is how it enacts such a "modification" by linking standard forms of writing—reasoning in public—to the desire to participate in the "undefined work of freedom" where individuals enable each other, collaboratively, to make up their minds through rhetorical interaction.

Far from being a pressure to conform, as process advocates claimed, Bruffee's practical rhetoric is intended rather to precipitate a crisis of authority in order to overcome immaturity and dependence. Nowhere in *A Short Course* is this more clear than in what Bruffee calls the "crunch." "The writing course crunch," Bruffee says, "is the moment when you face the question, 'Am I going to control my words and my ideas, or am I going to go on letting my words and ideas control me?' To choose to control your words and ideas, you may have to undergo a disturbing change. This change involves a change in the way you think about yourself. You may have to become less passive, dependent, and self-deprecating, and instead become more autonomous, self-possessed, and self-controlled" (143). The autonomy, self possession, and self control that Bruffee envisions for students should not be confused with what he calls "rampant individualism" or "isolated, self-directed enterprise." For Bruffee, the point of the "crunch," of successfully navigating the inevitable crisis of authority involved in learning—the freedom that one can achieve—is the "recognition of human interdependence" ("Way Out" 470). This vision, which has animated the four editions of *A Short Course*, as well as Bruffee's larger project of educational change, affirms the development of the individual as a fully socialized human being engaged in reciprocal relations with others. The lasting contribution of *A Short Course* is that it provides teachers and students alike with the conceptual framework and the tools of rhetorical exchange to make this happen.

NOTES

[1] Beal's review can be found in the National Archives of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island, which includes extensive collections of both Beal's and Bruffée's papers. We thank Robert A. Schwegler for pointing us to Beal's review of *A Short Course.*

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