

1983

Collaborative Learning in Context: The Problem with Peer Tutoring

Harvey Kail

University of Maine - Main, harvey.kail@umit.maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eng_facpub



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Kail, Harvey, "Collaborative Learning in Context: The Problem with Peer Tutoring" (1983). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 5.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eng_facpub/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Collaborative Learning in Context: The Problem with Peer Tutoring

During one of the many conversations about collaborative learning I have had as a Fellow of the Brooklyn Institute on Training Peer Writing Tutors, one of my colleagues asked, "So what's new about collaborative learning, anyway?" That question annoyed me considerably at the time because I knew that inconvenient as it was her question was undeniably appropriate. Why all the hullabaloo about collaborative learning, peer editing, peer tutoring? After all, people have been teaching each other collaboratively for as long as human beings can remember, learning together what they need to do and the best ways to do it. We couldn't have survived this long on the planet without the collective aptitude for paying useful attention to each other, for learning the co-labor of learning. There is certainly nothing new about this.

What is new, I think, is the formal and relatively large scale institutionalization of collaborative learning into the pedagogical structures of higher education, most specifically into the teaching of writing. While the gesture of students spontaneously teaching each other in dormitories, cafeterias, and study lounges has always been a part of the informal educational network, the formal demand that students work together in the classroom or the writing center is relatively recent. What's new, in other words, is that students are being required to work on their writing together, commanded to learn from each other; they must collaborate. We have begun to insist on it.

If I may shift my point of view for a moment, I believe a similar situation is developing for faculty in institutions where peer tutoring is an official part of a composition program. As composition teachers we too have a long tradition of collaborative learning outside the classroom—in our coffee lounges, our journals, our conferences, and even in our social get-togethers where, inevitably, we talk shop. Now, I will argue, the informal process of faculty members learning from each other is also changing with the institutionalization of collaborative learning, especially when it is formalized in peer tutoring programs. Faculty members are finding themselves inexorably involved with each other's teaching in new and sometimes uncomfortable ways. Although this change is by no means

Harvey Kail is assistant professor of English and Director of the Writing Lab at the University of Maine at Orono. His work in the preparation of this essay was supported by a University of Maine Summer Research Grant.

pervasive (and peer tutoring could well disappear before it becomes so), change is beginning to be felt in significant ways. In short, insisting on collaborative learning is already beginning to affect the context in which we experience the teaching and learning of composition, bending some of our basic pedagogical notions.

Our assumptions about teaching and learning have been based traditionally on the authority of a lineal model.¹ We imagine ourselves standing with knowledge behind us (in our backgrounds) and our students waiting, expectantly for the most part, in front of us. We think of ourselves thus as the transmitters and interpreters of important cultural knowledge, whether that knowledge is how to write well-focussed essays, how to repair rust in Datsun pickups, or how to appreciate the intricate beauties of a sonnet. In our case knowledge is passed along from the literary culture through the teacher to the student. The learning that counts in institutional terms—grades, acquiring credit hours, commencement—moves in the same direction, from us to them. In the current parlance of composition pedagogy, the teacher “intervenes” in the student’s writing process. The syntax of this student-teacher relationship is simple and declarative: a teacher teaches a student—subject, verb, object.

Obviously, this simple sentence does not begin to hint at the complexity of the teaching-learning relationship. Many teachers would be quick to point out that teaching is a “two-way street” and that they learn from their students. Yet, at least in my experience, most teachers cannot articulate what it is they do learn from their students except occasionally to relate stray bits of usually trivial information.

When writing labs became increasingly popular in the 1970s, this lineal model did not really change in most people’s minds—certainly not in mine—except that a third party, a tutor, was added to the relatively straightforward progression of teaching and learning. A typical situation frequently produced the following series of relationships: a student, often poorly prepared (whatever that might mean) and having difficulty satisfying the writing teacher, would be sent to the writing lab, or drop in on his or her own, where a tutor would be assigned. The tutor’s job would be to help the new tutee to better satisfy the learning demands made by the teacher—better grammar, clearer focus, more development, whatever. The eventual establishment of peer tutoring programs did not, at least at first, alter our basic concept of the relationships between and among these people. We could even add without disruption a fourth individual, the writing lab director or peer tutor trainer, whose job it was to teach tutors how to tutor. Presumably, this knowledge of how-to-tutor-writing is also passed on in the same lineal fashion, and so the syntax of the teaching-learning relationship remained

1. There is a useful distinction to be made between lineal and linear. Linear is a technical term in mathematics describing a relationship between variables such that when they are plotted against each other, the result will be a straight line. Lineal describes a relation among a series of causes or arguments such that the sequence does not come back to the starting point. The opposite of linear is non-linear; the opposite of lineal is recursive. For a fuller explanation see Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), p. 250. I am indebted to Bateson for much of my own thinking about the relationship between composition pedagogy and communication theory.

essentially the same after peer tutoring as before: a teacher teaches a student to tutor a fellow student to satisfy another teacher. This is the way I thought about writing lab tutoring for a long time. I would call it the service model of peer tutoring.

Over the past two years, however, I have begun to notice that my life as a writing lab director and peer tutor trainer is a good deal more interesting and a good deal more complicated than this service model suggests it should be. For one thing, collaborative learning in the form of peer tutoring disrupts the traditional relationships between student writers and their primary audience, their teachers. Like doctor-patient, lawyer-client, or even priest-penitent relationships, the one between a teacher and a student is considered unmediated, confidential, and even holy in a way. Now this sacred pair—teacher/reader and student/author—is becoming occasionally a ragged trinity: teacher-student-tutor. If we take into account the undeniable influence of the tutor trainer, we find ourselves looking at an ungainly and unfamiliar foursome that refuses in practice to move smoothly and predictably along its assigned service model course. It insists on a far more complicated syntax.

For instance, the traditional assumption of confidentiality between teacher and student, though often broken informally in the past, is now quite impossible once peer tutoring officially commences. As a writing lab director I now know what many of my colleagues are doing in their classrooms and saying to their students, whether I want to know or not. I view their teaching through the eyes of the peer tutors who reconstruct it—and no doubt distort it—from working with their tutees. It is an odd and dislocating feeling, indeed, to find oneself the uninvited and silent observer of a colleague's teaching style as one hears it rendered in the conversation of tutors discussing the teachers of their respective tutees, as invariably they will, being human. One cannot banish such talk; it is a vital part of learning to be a peer tutor. Nor, for that matter, can I pretend that my own teaching has not become highly visible if not transparent to my colleagues through my efforts as a teacher of tutors. We are housed in glass writing labs. My point here is not that my colleagues and I are teaching badly or, for that matter, teaching well (which I think is the more usual case), or that the student tutors know a good deal about all of what we do, successful or otherwise, though this in itself is true enough. More to the point is that peer tutoring involves teachers officially in each other's teaching and involves us officially with each other's students at a variety of different levels. This institutional involvement changes the world that the student writers and their audiences inhabit.

Let me provide an example of how peer tutoring programs might function to change the writing environment. Recently a friend and colleague of mine buttonholed me in front of the English department mailboxes. One of his students, it turns out, is being tutored by one of the peer tutors. My colleague is a bit ruffled because, for one thing, he isn't sure where his student's words leave off and the tutor's words begin. How, he wants to know, is he to evaluate the work? Second, he feels that the tutor might be working at cross-purposes with him; that, in effect, his philosophy of composition is at odds, perhaps directly opposed, to hers (and perhaps to some degree with mine since I, after all, had taught the

tutor to be a tutor). Suddenly, in the name of service and of helping out the weaker students, he is losing a bit of control over his classroom; his student isn't precisely his student anymore. The student, meanwhile, has been moving into an increasingly complex world of writing in which subtle pressures and perhaps conflicting demands are persuading her to adjust her language to the realities of her now truly multiple audience: her teacher and her tutor, with whom she has established an important writing relationship. The peer tutor, in turn, finds herself in a bind because even though she has been trained to help her peers satisfy their teachers, she cannot help but to exert her own influence as critical audience. As for the lab director, he is busy trying to arbitrate the whole process in such a way that nobody notices that teaching and learning writing has become in this case an ensemble activity.

It would be easy to dismiss all of this as department politics or, more likely, as a "breakdown in communications" between the writing lab and this particular faculty member—a public relations problem. Perhaps, but if so it is a public relations problem of enormous and probably unsolvable proportion. It is not simply a matter of informing my colleagues that peer tutors are expected not to write the papers of their tutees. The tutors certainly know that and the faculty know that they know it. Nor is it a matter of reassuring faculty members that their ideas about composition pedagogy will be reinforced in the writing lab. That wouldn't necessarily be true, perhaps couldn't be true given the plurality of the competing but often unarticulated theories of composition in our department. Now if all the tutoring in writing labs were done by faculty members—if there were no peer tutoring programs—this dissonance would be considerably muted. Other teachers know the unwritten codes of faculty behavior and represent along with the classroom teacher the authority of the literate establishment, an authority remarkably unblemished by often contradictory theories of composition within the profession.

It is the presence of student tutors as official members of the teaching as well as the learning community that accounts for the major difference. Although I do not want to put too much weight on one example, I would suggest that the two-minute exchange I had with my colleague on the way to our respective mailboxes, coffee and books carefully counterbalanced, did not represent a "breakdown in communication" at all, but a very clear communication that the service model of peer tutoring is inadequate to describe what is actually beginning to take place where tutoring programs become an official activity of English departments. Instead of "how to" knowledge being passed on down the teacher-student hierarchy, it seems to be backing up, moving around through a system shaped like an errant plumbing job. As I thought more and more about what was actually going on as a result of my introducing peer tutoring to my institution, I came to understand that I had become part of a maze of influences and a tangle of conversations about writing in which I was only one of the major speakers and listeners. As I worked through, relationship by relationship, what I now saw as the systemic context of peer tutoring, I found that by training students to be peer tutors I was also to some degree instructing my colleagues on how to teach composition, and that composition students and faculty members were teaching

my tutors how to be tutors and the tutors were, in turn, teaching me how to be a peer-tutor trainer. Not lineal but recursive, the complex syntax of peer tutoring turns back on itself in a series of infinite loops of influence; cause and effect, teaching and learning chase each other around and around; and students and teachers through the locus of the writing lab find themselves to some degree bound up in a wholly new institutional relationship.

The problem that peer tutoring will pose in the next few years is simply whether or not it is worth the trouble. Will faculty members and writing lab directors find it sufficiently rewarding to learn how to teach composition in all the combinations inherent in the above discussed cybernetic model and so continue to support peer tutoring programs? Or will the habits of our lineal epistemology prove so profoundly established in our institutional and professional lives that collaborative learning in the form of official peer tutoring will be perceived more as an annoyance than a contribution to literacy education?

Some writing labs have chosen, I fear, simply to resolve the problem by establishing peer tutoring programs that do not actually make use of collaborative learning. That is, student tutors are used exclusively as quiz graders and exercise givers, lab aides who administer to but do not collaborate with other students who are classified as "remedial" and in need of certain "writing skills." The problems (and the rewards) of composition—invention, development, focus, organization, voice—are not part of these tutors' areas of responsibility, and thus they are unlikely to come into conflict with their directors or with other teachers. The problem with this solution to the problem, besides its irretrievable dullness, is that it does not involve student tutors in the intellectual life of either the English department or the institution as a whole. Peer tutors who are awake to writing as a way of participating in much of the important business of the world are not likely to want to involve themselves for long in roles that do not require thought or judgment. Tutor turnover and dissatisfaction seem to me intrinsic to peer tutoring programs that, in the final analysis, exploit students by turning them into extensions of the teacher-student hierarchy, the pre-collaborative learning grammar of teaching composition.

Another solution to the problem is, of course, the eventual disappearance of formal peer tutoring programs altogether. Faculty members who feel, justifiably or not, that their authority is undermined by peer tutors or who believe that collaborative learning can never be more than "the blind leading the blind," though they may not actively oppose a peer tutoring program, will not be likely to support it positively by referring their own students to the lab. At the same time writing lab directors may tire of waging public relations campaigns (along with the other numerous tasks involved in maintaining a quality peer tutoring program) based on the inadequate service model and so look to other, less stressful ways to staff their labs. Thus, the demise of peer tutoring as an official institutional program.

It could be argued that the benefits of collaborative learning so much touted recently can be had through classroom practices stressing small group work, thus avoiding the aggravation of an official apparatus outside the classroom. The

only limitation to this solution is the classroom. The same students work together only with each other and only for a semester. At the end of the course they are disbursed back into the student population, and there is no opportunity to develop an ongoing and committed group of student writers and tutors. On the other hand, a formal peer tutoring program that involves carefully selected students first in a rigorous training course, then in continuing positions as student tutors in institutionally supported writing centers might over time establish a tradition that students, not only faculty, think writing is important, and that students, not just faculty, can be officially involved as a critical audience of student writing.²

I stress over time, because what I am talking about here falls finally into the realm of academic legend, the stories that students (and faculty) tell each other about their lives in educational institutions. If the lore of academia comes to include a tradition of student tutors as part of the official audience of other students' writing, it is my guess that we will have fundamentally changed our ideas of what teaching and learning writing actually involves. It is the potential loss of this growing community of students, organized and supported through formal peer tutoring programs, that must be weighed against the problems that their presence is likely to engender.

Of course, the purpose of any composition program is improvement in student writing, and there is no sense establishing an academic lore that carries the message "these peer tutors get in the way of successfully teaching writing." Tutoring programs are going to have to be encouraged or discarded in the light of their contribution to our common goals. The best solution at the moment to the problem that peer tutoring poses—is it worth the trouble?—lies in sustaining these programs long enough to figure out how to evaluate them in the systemic context that I have outlined in this article. I am not suggesting, however, that we will ever be able quantitatively to prove that peer tutoring "causes" an improvement in student writing.³ What we can and should do is examine more fruitfully, both in theory and in practice, *how* students and teachers learn when their writing environment is organized to include collaborative learning in the form of formal peer tutoring programs.

2. On establishing peer tutoring programs that integrate a credit-bearing training course and writing lab tutoring see Ken Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1980) and "Peer Tutoring Writing Centers," in Lawrence W. Kasden and Daniel Hoerber, eds., *Basic Writing: A Collection of Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1979). See also Paula Beck, Thom Hawkins, and Marcia Silver, "Training and Using Peer Tutors," *College English*, 38 (1978), 432-49.

3. Nor am I suggesting that we just pretend at evaluation. See my "Evaluating Our Own Peer Tutoring Programs: A Few Leading Questions," *Writing Lab Newsletter*, 7, No. 10 (June, 1983), 1-4.