

# The Politics of Peer Tutoring

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Over the past ten years or so, peer tutoring has worked its way up from the margins of academic life, from the realm of academic support services and soft money, to claim an integral position in many, if not most, writing programs. (1) Collaborative learning and peer tutoring are now recognized as innovative contributions not only to the writing abilities but more broadly to the liberal education of undergraduates. Exemplary peer tutoring programs such as Kenneth A. Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan and Tori Haring-Smith's Writing Fellows at Brown University have become models in the field, with an identity, a coherent rationale, and a capacity for replication.

Thus the question to be asked about peer tutoring is no longer why such programs are necessary, but how tutoring can best contribute to the development of writing abilities and the intellectual life of undergraduates. Indeed, peer tutoring has reached the point where distinct models are vying for influence to disseminate their sense of purpose and possibility. What follows is our attempt to sort peer tutoring programs under two broad headings: the writing center model such as Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan and the curriculum-based model such as Haring-Smith's Writing Fellows Program. We propose to discuss these two models of peer tutoring in terms of their administrative structures and, more significantly, to analyze their underlying educational ideologies, the political assumptions which are often hidden in educational programs by the very process of institutionalization. We want to talk, that is, about the way peer tutoring programs constitute the educational consciousness of peer tutors and tutees. We will argue that while the curriculum-based model may be administratively more efficient, the writing center model offers an educational setting in which collaboration among peers can help students reach a critical understanding and redefinition of themselves as learners.

## Two Models: Writing Center and Curriculum-Based

First, let's characterize the two models as organizational strategies. The writing center model such as Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan is organized as a voluntary association where students who want to improve their writing

drop in or make an appointment to work with a peer tutor in a writing center (Bruffee, "The Brooklyn Plan"). Students can be at any stage in composing. Sometimes they want to talk to a tutor to clarify the assignment or to get some initial ideas down on paper. Other times, students come to tutoring sessions with drafts in progress, specific questions, and specific requests for response. Or students may bring in graded papers to discuss their strengths and weaknesses and the instructor's comments. And in still other cases, students call on peer tutors to deal with nonacademic writing—job letters, graduate school applications, résumés, and so on. Most students refer themselves, while some seek peer tutoring on the recommendation of an instructor. As a rule, though, the success of the writing center model depends on publicity and word of mouth, the extent to which the benefits of peer tutoring have penetrated the informal networks of student life.

The curriculum-based model, such as Haring-Smith's Writing Fellows Program, on the other hand, seems to grow out of the premise that if peer tutoring is good for those students who seek it voluntarily, it's even better to require it, to make sure that students in composition classes or writing intensive courses in other fields hook up with peer tutors. In the curriculum-based model, tutors are typically attached to a course as much as to a writing center. Ten years ago, when peer tutoring was still viewed mainly as a remedial activity, the curriculum-based model often provided a required lab component in basic writing courses, where peer tutors administered drills and exercises. More recently, however, the curriculum-based model has expanded the scope of its activities in new and much more sophisticated directions. Sometimes peer tutors provide in-class tutoring in coordination with the course instructor. Other times, the peer tutors provide written or oral responses to early drafts of writing assignments to encourage revision before the students turn in final drafts for their instructors to grade. In any case, in the curriculum-based model, peer tutors are, as it were, written into the plan of instruction. They're part of the course.

Thus the curriculum-based model operates through official channels; student writers receive peer tutoring as a part of their classes. By building peer tutoring into the course structure, the curriculum-based model makes peer tutors an extension of the writing program, a way to deliver state-of-the-art peer responses to student writers. Building peer tutoring into the plan of instruction in such courses guarantees moreover a certain level of efficiency: tutors will have someone to tutor and program administrators will be able quite accurately to predict the number of tutoring sessions that will take place, the number of tutors necessary, the best times to schedule tutoring, and so on.

Looking at the writing center and curriculum-based models as organizational strategies, the issue that divides them seems to be how best to

plug in tutors with tutees. We have, that is, two delivery systems and the meaningful question to ask appears to be which one works better, which one better delivers the knowledge it takes to learn to write well. By such operational criteria, the curriculum-based model has some real strengths compared to the writing center model: it makes sure tutors and tutees connect: it promotes communication between tutors and faculty; it simplifies administration by concentrating peer tutoring in selected courses. And it avoids some of the potential pitfalls in the writing-center model: the no-shows, the stigma of seeking help, the indifference, the parasitical behavior. For these reasons, the curriculum-based model has become increasingly widespread. Compared to the Writing Fellows Program at Brown University, the writing center model appears to be diffuse and unfocused, at best an adjunct service for those students not enrolled in courses targeted by the curriculum-based peer tutoring program.

If, however, we stop thinking solely in terms of operational efficiency for a moment and begin talking in terms of educational ideology, we can make some distinctions we couldn't make by looking at these models as administrative strategies. The differences we are going to see at this level of analysis are not operational but political; they concern not the delivery of services but the powers ascribed to and internalized by tutors and tutees—the ideology of peer tutoring.

## Models and the Ideology of Generation and Transmission

According to the traditional ideology of teaching and learning, universities "generate" knowledge and then "transmit" this knowledge into the academic community and eventually to the community outside the university. One need only look in the front of a dozen college catalogues to see how habitual and commonsensical this ideology of generation and transmission has become. The metaphor is worth unpacking: knowledge is generated like heat is produced in a college's steamplant or electricity from a nuclear reactor and then transmitted through the steamlines or electrical cables to a radiator or an electric typewriter—or a student. Scholars on the "cutting edge" of their fields, on the boundary between what we know and what we don't, generate new knowledge, turning darkness into light. While the moment of ignition or transformation is so mysterious that we cannot explain it, the process of transmission can be easily traced. Slowly new knowledge works its way back from the "cutting edge," from scholar to scholar, in articles, monographs, books, to where it is assimilated by teachers who, eventually, transmit it to students. For convenience sake, we will label this cluster of ideas the "gen/tran" ideology, for generation and transmission.

Where does peer tutoring fit into the gen/tran ideology? According to the gen/tran ideology of knowledge, peer tutoring is conceived as a new fixture in the transmission lines. It is a substation along the way designed to jump up the signal or change the quality of transmission. With the help of peer tutors, students who aren't receiving the signals properly can tune in better to the same message, except that now it is in a new voice, the voice of the students' peers. The key word for understanding the politics of peer tutoring within the gen/tran ideology is supplement—more power for transmission.

Peer tutors then get the authority to transmit knowledge through an act of installation: they are installed in the existing power grid. They receive knowledge from their tutor trainers, turn and pass this know-how on to their tutees. Within gen/tran, the pedagogy—that is, the relationship among students, teachers, and curriculum—remains what it always was, hierarchical. A new component has been put in place to improve the system's performance: a teacher teaches a student or group of students to then turn and teach other students. The only difference in education after the installation of peer tutors is that the transmission lines are a little longer. They can now reach a larger and perhaps more diversified audience. But the authority to generate and transmit knowledge, even though mediated by new voices and new social relationships remains where it always was—firmly in faculty hands.

In the curriculum-based model of peer tutoring, students working as peer tutors can't help but experience their own activity, and with it a sense of themselves, as part of a delivery system, a supplement to repair the short circuits, recharge the sources of power, and keep the transmission lines functioning smoothly. By attaching peer tutoring to the official structures of teaching and learning, by writing them into the plan of instruction, the curriculum-based model makes the peer tutors an extension of the faculty. In effect, peer tutoring in the curriculum-based model removes tutors from the student community by installing them a power station or two above their peers, a step away from student culture, a step closer to the faculty. Thus, the curriculum-based model keeps tutors from collaborating with tutees as peers because the tutors are already identified with the functions of the faculty and the writing program, already implicated in the lines of transmission. In the curriculum-based model, the key collaboration is designing a plan of instruction, a collaboration that takes place between faculty and student-tutors, and not among themselves.

## Enter Collaborative Learning

It might be argued that the writing center model of peer tutoring, with its system of paying tutors and locating them in an officially sanctioned

writing center, operates under the aegis of gen/tran as much as the curriculum-based model. And that seems to us often to be the case, that in fact many writing centers are designed to be part of a larger delivery system of writing instruction. It is the exceptions, however, such as those based on Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan, that interest us, the writing centers that emphasize collaboration between faculty and peer tutors.

Peer tutoring programs based on collaborative learning are, of course, located inside the institutions of higher education, but they are situated at a remove from the normal delivery system of curriculum and instruction, in the semi-autonomous space of writing centers. What gives such writing centers their semi-autonomous character is that although they are part of the official institutional structure, they operate primarily as voluntary associations of peers. As we have pointed out elsewhere, peer tutoring based on collaborative learning taps into the networks of mutual aid already present in student culture (Kail, Trimbur). Students have always banded together informally, in rap sessions and study groups, to deal with the intellectual demands of their experience as undergraduates. Collaborative learning, in this respect, is an effort by educators to mobilize the power of peer influence toward the intellectual activity of co-learning. By organizing tutors and tutees as co-learners, peer tutoring based on collaborative learning does not so much repair a dysfunctional system of transmissions as it offers an alternative to the dominant hierarchical model of teaching and learning, an alternative based on voluntary social interaction among students. It replaces the metaphor of the generation and transmission of knowledge with that of a conversation.

To replace generation and transmission with conversation is to challenge some of the basic beliefs and practices in higher education. For one thing, it challenges the traditional reward system, with its emphasis on individual performance and competition among students for grades and faculty esteem. Collaboration among students in the form of peer tutoring may make faculty nervous because it seems to verge on plagiarism, cheating, and ghostwriting. More important, though, collaboration among students challenges the way we habitually think about the authority of knowledge.

As Kenneth A. Bruffee has pointed out, to think of knowledge as conversation among knowledgeable peers is to abandon the view that knowledge is fixed once and for all, something that once generated needs only delivery ("Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'"). Nor is knowledge hierarchical in the sense that we think of the individual scholar at the "cutting edge" confronting the unknown and wrestling meaning out of the void. We get knowledge not from some higher authority but from ourselves and our activity talking to others, even when this inherently social activity of conversation is displaced into the solitude of reading and writing. We are never really alone facing the

void, as tempting as such mythology may be. Knowledge, rather, is a social process, a part of and inseparable from what we call the "social fabric," authorized by the mutual consent of knowledgeable peers.

Locating the sources of knowledge in the social fabric rather than in the power lines of generation and transmission offers a way to talk about peer tutoring that goes beyond the operational model of plugging tutors into the grid. Peer tutoring, in this view, is not a supplement to the normal delivery system but an implicit critique of gen/tran ideology and the official structures of curriculum and instruction. To reorganize the relationship among students is simultaneously to probe the traditional relationships of teaching and learning.

## Peer Tutoring and the Crisis of Authority

By posing an alternative to the prevailing hierarchy of generation/transmission, collaborative learning precipitates a crisis of authority. It asks students to rely on themselves, to learn on their own in the absence of faculty authority figures or their surrogates. In tutoring programs based on collaborative learning, tutors and tutees not only must learn to work together. They must also learn to free themselves from their dependence on the faculty continually measuring and certifying their learning. To do this, of course, requires that students break with some of the habitual behaviors of schooling and form new habits of thought and action. Collaborative learning in this sense begins as an exercise in unlearning. Unless tutors and tutees unlearn the ideology of gen/tran, they will inevitably reproduce competitive, individualistic, authority-dependent behaviors embedded in traditional education. The power of collaborative learning, we believe, is that it offers students a way to unlearn what the sociologist and cultural critic Richard Sennett calls "visions of a satisfying omnipotent authority," to reinterpret the power of the faculty, and to see that their own autonomous co-learning constitutes the practical source of knowledge.

This process of unlearning and reinterpretation is a complex one. At the risk of appearing overly schematic, however, we can trace its broad outlines. As Sennett points out in his book *Authority*, a crisis of authority that leads to renouncing an authority as omnipotent proceeds through three stages: detachment, reflection, and reentrance. According to Sennett, the first stage is marked by "detachment from the influence of authority." This is what can happen, we believe, in the semi-autonomous space of writing centers. By removing themselves from the lines of transmission, tutors and tutees form their own co-learning communities, establish their joint purposes, decide on a plan to work together, and evaluate the results. The point of peer tutoring, in this respect, is not the delivery of knowledge from tutor to tutee but an experience of their own

powers as learners that will lead peers to discover authority in each other. Peer tutoring based on collaborative learning begins, then, by organizing tutors and tutees outside the normal channels of teaching and learning so that they can constitute each other as active subjects in the social interaction of co-learning.

The process of co-learning leads to the second stage of Sennett's sequence, to the reflection "What was I like under the authority's influence?" As students detach themselves from faculty influence in order to work together collaboratively, they may also come to a mutual recognition of their shared status as undergraduates, their common position at the bottom of the academic hierarchy where they compete as individuals for personal success and faculty esteem. This mutual recognition can take students beyond an atomized perception of their own personal predicament to a social understanding of a system that frequently pits student against student in a struggle for the scarce resource of faculty approval. The experience of co-learning can help students not only to remove themselves from faculty influence. It can also help them to understand the structures of authority they have internalized.

Finally, based on the work of detachment and reflection, a further question, Sennett says, can be asked: "Is the authority legitimate?" The point of collaborative learning, in this regard, is not to reject the authority of the faculty out of hand. Such rejection, in fact, does not lead to autonomy but can lead instead to withdrawal from authority into individual isolation and cynicism. Or it may lead students to substitute idealized versions of authority for the real forms of power that dominate their lives, as sometimes occurs in peer tutoring when tutees rehabilitate the authority of the faculty by transferring it to the tutor, thus establishing a new relationship of dependence. These sequences of events need not necessarily occur, however. Another possibility, as Sennett suggests of crises of authority in general and we see as one of the educational goals of peer tutoring, is that once students have removed themselves from the official structures, they can then reengage the forms of authority in their lives by demystifying the authority of knowledge and its institutions.

It is this reentrance that offers the most dramatic argument for peer tutoring based on the ideology of collaborative learning. It is not that writing center-based peer tutoring works better than curriculum-based programs and their implied gen/tran ideology. Our argument is that it does a different kind of work. Curriculum-based programs, in our view, suppress the crisis of authority precipitated when students work together, domesticate it, and channel the social forces released by collaboration into the established structures of teaching and learning. Peer tutoring based on collaborative learning, by contrast, provides students with a form of social organization to negotiate the crisis successfully and reenter the official structures of authority as active agents

rather than as passive objects of transmission. The power of the faculty and transmitted knowledge is still there, embedded in the institutions of higher education. What students can gain is the ability to reinterpret that power by defining the authority of knowledge as a relationship among people—not a hierarchical structure of generation and transmission. When peer tutoring works (and we are the first to admit that the complex schema we have outlined frequently short circuits), it does more than help students learn. The experience of co-learning changes students and helps them to see that the power ascribed to the faculty depends on the students' own sense of powerlessness and their need for omnipotent authority.

The benefits of peer tutoring can be considerable. Once faculty lose the omnipotence ascribed to them, they become more interesting and useful to students. The faculty's struggle to generate and authorize knowledge through conversation with their peers becomes more accessible to students, divested of the mystery that surrounds the scholar on the cutting edge. And by reinterpreting the authority of the faculty, students learn to recognize their own powers as learners and to invest authority in each other. And what this leads to is not so much a better delivery system but a student culture that takes learning and intellectual activity seriously.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>For a description of the range of current peer tutoring programs, see *A Guide to Writing Programs, Writing Centers, Peer Tutoring, Writing Across the Curriculum*. Ed. Tori Haring-Smith. Glenview: Scott Foresman, 1984.

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