

Kenneth Bruffee and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing

by Ron Maxwell

Kenneth Bruffee's influence on thinking, teaching, and writing during the past 30 years has been immense. Early in that period the Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors inspired its Fellows to contribute broadly to their profession through their teaching, scholarship, administration, and academic leadership. Harvey Kail's contribution to this issue, "Innovation and Repetition: The Brooklyn College Summer Institute in Training Peer Writing Tutors 25 Years Later," links the range and focus of their professional activities to Bruffee's leadership beginning in the late 1970s. One important element of that leadership centers on the growth and development of peer tutoring in colleges and universities across the country, where Bruffee's ideas and practices have informed the work of thousands of peer tutors in writing and scores of writing center professionals.

Another venue of Ken Bruffee's influence is the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, which defines itself as an organization that

promotes the teaching of writing through collaborative learning. Peer tutors and NCPTW professionals help students to become self-sufficient writers. NCPTW professionals are leaders in collaborative approaches, respond to the challenges of creating and operating writing centers, develop innovative peer tutoring programs, and promote the work of their peer tutors. The NCPTW offers peer tutors the opportunity to contribute in professional and scholarly ways to the larger writing center community and is dedicated to providing forums

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for tutors to share and present research at national and international conferences (“About Us”).

At each of the NCPTW’s annual fall assemblies, conference participants hold a business meeting, attended by writing center professionals and peer tutors alike, where they consider the state of the conference and plan for the future. This *ad hoc* committee solicits and reviews proposals for hosting the conference. All are invited to join in these deliberations, for here—as in all affairs of the conference—participation is membership.

In 1984, when Brown University hosted the first National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, Tori Haring-Smith, then Director of Brown’s Writing Fellows Program, quite naturally invited Ken Bruffee to deliver the Conference’s first keynote address. I say “quite naturally” because by 1984 Bruffee had established himself as a nationally recognized leader in peer tutoring and collaborative learning. His journal articles had appeared in *College English* and *Liberal Education*; he had presented frequently at national and regional conferences and conducted workshops around the country; his writing textbook, *A Short Course in Writing: Composition, Collaborative Learning, and Constructive Reading*, was about to appear in its third edition; and Fellows of his Brooklyn Institute on Peer Tutoring and Collaborative Learning had been at work in their home institutions for several years.¹

In the early 1980s the composition community nationally had been animated by discussions of collaborative learning pedagogy. By 1984 peer tutoring in writing had been around for about ten years but had grown considerably in the most recent years. Part of that growth occurred as a direct result of the Brooklyn Institute, where its Fellows came with the declared support of their colleges and universities and with an obligation at the close of the Institute to initiate peer tutoring in writing programs at their home institutions. All did that, and many of them also brought their peer tutors to that first meeting of the NCPTW at Brown, where it was time, Ken Bruffee believed, to lay out for peer tutors the theory supporting their work, at a moment when our profession had begun to talk about knowledge and learning in new ways.

Calling his talk “Peer Tutoring: A Conceptual Background,” Bruffee sought to explain the resistance to collaborative learning too frequently found among college and university faculty and administration. That resistance, he said, lies in an outmoded theory of knowledge and learning. He recognized that only in the last 15 years have we had an epistemology capable of explaining why collaborative learning works (though we have known for a much longer time that it does work), even

as doubters claim it's the blind leading the blind. That doubting stance, Bruffee claimed, can only exist in a learning community dominated by the prevailing and traditional Cartesian theory of knowledge and learning, a theory now seriously challenged by Thomas Kuhn's notion in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that scientific knowledge is a social artifact, Clifford Geertz's conviction advanced in *Local Knowledge* that "human thought is consummately social," and Richard Rorty's thesis in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* that all knowledge is socially justified belief. Bruffee showed his Brown University audience that

the visual or ocular imagery in the language we use to talk about knowledge reveals that the prevailing, traditional view of knowledge and the authority of knowledge is based on a metaphor and is therefore optional. We are free to say that the authority of knowledge has its source in something other than a clear view of reality. It may have its source, indeed, in the consensus of a community of knowledgeable peers. What we know draws its authority from what we together, as a coherent, language-constituted community, agree to call knowledge. The more of us who agree, the larger the community of knowledgeable peers, the greater the authority of our knowledge. "Universal truths," Rorty tells us, are just propositions from which no one can convincingly dissent.

That conversation generates knowledge is nothing new to writing peer tutors, but a theory of knowledge with language communities at its very center gives them an enhanced rationale for what they do, and their new understandings will play themselves out in later NCPTW meetings as peer tutors and their writing center professionals examine the dynamics of peer tutoring.

In closing, Bruffee recognized that "sooner or later at this conference we will open up most of the issues that concern us about peer tutoring." But he hoped, further, that "in trying to understand all those issues and cope with the problems they raise for us...we will find a more useful and enlightening tool in a 'social constructionist' understanding of knowledge and learning than we will find in post-Cartesian epistemology."

Characteristically, Bruffee ended his talk at Brown with an anecdote, an experience related to him by a peer tutor, who tells how off-putting the faculty member (a priest) behind his desk (the altar), surrounded by books (the sacred texts) can be to a college student. But happily the peership developing among students in the writing center improves relations between faculty and students, as students working together "undergo a change in their attitudes toward their professors," gain confidence in the company of their professors, and learn to talk to them differently.

However, peership in the writing center between tutor and tutee can be derailed by traditional and unexamined conventions in the workplace, as understood by one Penn State peer tutor.

In 1982 when peer tutoring in writing began at Penn State, peer tutors worked in 6' X 6' cubicles, little “offices,” each equipped with one large desk, one swivel desk chair, and one side-chair—the best stuff we could scrounge from university storage rooms. Without thinking much about it, though perhaps secretly happy to have the authority of furniture bestowed upon them, peer tutors sat at the desk in the swivel chair and their tutees sat in the side-chair, juggling textbook, writing assignment, and a drafted paper on their laps while craning their necks to read whatever their tutors proffered on the desktop. One day a tutor, observing the awkwardness and impropriety of that arrangement, took the side-chair, leaving the desk chair to the tutee. The effects were immediate and telling: the tutee spontaneously arranged all his writing materials—textbook, writing assignment, draft and pencil—on the desktop. The writer was immediately more in charge of the session, leaving the tutor to crane a neck before these materials, and the writer acted more independently as he seemed to be taking more responsibility for the writing. Such seeming proved, in fact, to be the case, and when the news came to the staff meeting, before long all tutors in our center had adopted the geographical shift. Soon thereafter, as funds became available, we were working at café tables. Much had come from the adjustments of an alert tutor who appraised a non-productive academic hierarchy and acted upon that appraisal in the spirit with which Bruffee had concluded his 1984 address.

By 1990 when Bruffee delivered his second keynote address at the NCPTW's meeting at Penn State University, he approached the subject of his earlier keynote from a new direction. Whereas at Brown in 1984 he had examined the theory of collaborative learning and its challenge to prevailing and traditional pedagogy, in 1990 at Penn State he advocates collaborative-type peer tutoring as an alternative to monitor-type tutoring. The story Bruffee's student tells in 1984 can serve as a bridge between the two talks. Neither his 1990 nor his 2007 talks is as traditionally scholarly as Bruffee's 1984 address at Brown, but, then, circumstances had changed over the intervening years. Now Bruffee is more confidant that peer tutoring and collaborative learning in general have succeeded. In 1984 he had regretted that Jane Abercrombie's 1960 successes in teaching medical diagnosis in small collaborative groups at the University of London seemed to have had “little or no impact on medical school faculties anywhere in Britain or America.” Now Bruffee is pleased to cite the Harvard Medical School's New Pathways program and a

“recent public broadcasting documentary showing lots of children working in small groups in grammar schools and high schools” as examples of how constructive conversation in collaborative learning groups had grown.

On that note we can observe that Bruffee’s appeal to scholarship in his “conceptual background” talk—with its six-page annotated bibliography—at Brown six years prior had inspired a generation of writing tutors and writing center professionals. Peer tutors at Penn State and elsewhere had by 1990 researched and written on peer tutoring topics in course papers, conference presentations, undergraduate honors theses, and even journal articles. Clearly, Bruffee’s appeal to scholarship in 1984 was paying off, even as in 1990 he turns from the literature and theory of collaborative learning to tutoring dynamics as peer tutors know them, dynamics reaching beyond the writing center.

In his 1990 address Bruffee calls upon peer tutors to recognize their importance as agents of change and extend their energies abroad on the campus, in and out of classrooms. The key to their influence there, he says, is peership among peer tutors and between peer tutors and the writers with whom they work. Some types of tutoring programs, however, develop peership better than others. Monitor type tutoring programs tend to extend traditional authority structures into the student body, whereas collaborative types strengthen peership, which Bruffee considers the essential ingredient among students as they seek to serve as agents of change on their campuses: “Collaborative type peer tutors see the institution they work and study in from the same position their tutees see it, and they manifestly live with the same vicissitudes, burdens, limitations, and constraints of normal student life that their tutees live with.”

Of course Bruffee knows that encouraging peer tutors to take on these new responsibilities harbors some risk, for peer tutors may choose to exercise their agency right at home, as Bruffee’s own students did, he tells us, in their training course at Brooklyn College. At Penn State today peer tutors share in the administration of our program because early on their predecessors persuaded me that such leadership would strengthen us—by serving as an agenda committee for staff meetings, by conducting those meetings, and by in general organizing our activities, from pre-conference rehearsals to open-mike nights. Later, other peer tutors built on their experiences as peer reviewers in their training course to initiate peer review workshops in classes where they were invited. In another local development, a political science professor who employed an undergraduate teaching assistant in one of his courses learned of our collaborative-type peer tutoring program and began to require that his TAs take our training course before reporting for work, thus miti-

gating some of the monitor-type tutoring on our campus. As in many writing centers, peer tutor innovations often become topics in NCPTW conference presentations, where peer tutors lead discussions on collaborative learning enterprises, thus illustrating the connections between collaborative learning theory and practice—themes in Ken Bruffee's presentations to the NCPTW and continuing in peer tutor presentations at the annual conference.

Carol Brenneisen, a Penn State peer tutor in 1990 and one of the leaders in organizing the 1990 Conference, joined in peer tutor response to Bruffee's address by saying: "The Conference is an example of what we can do when we get together, build enthusiasm, and decide what needs to be done. Once we are excited about changing [things]...we start to formulate our own ideas and our own plans—we wouldn't dream of waiting for approval."

Bruffee's 2007 keynote, reprinted in this issue, can speak for itself. We can see that he has introduced a new topic, but he is still exploring the power of collaborative learning to change peoples' lives—now the peer tutors' own. I note, too, that he introduces two important new resources: Barbara Roswell's ethnographic study of peer tutors and the Peer Tutor Alumni Research Project. Upon graduation, many peer tutors in his audience will surely be contributing to the Alumni Project. Bruffee closes by reminding peer tutors that "you can learn things that serve you personally and professionally and that give you a background that will help you serve your families, your hometowns, your nation, and sometime, maybe, our world."

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Ken Bruffee's contributions to the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing have been many and diverse. His timely talks to peer tutors—from his jump-start keynote in 1984 to his more recent challenging jolts—have reassured and inspired peer tutors to continue their important work. His scholarly publications and the Brooklyn Institutes have elucidated the complex philosophical underpinnings of collaborative learning and helped many to apply his teachings. His textbook, *A Short Course in Writing: Composition, Collaborative Learning, and Constructive Reading*, with its thoughtfully conceived section on training peer tutors, has guided many writing center administrators since 1979.

So, what can we expect during the next 25 years of the NCPTW? Judging by the 50-some papers, panel discussions, workshops and demonstrations of the 2007 Conference, writing peer tutors will be exercising their transforming energies well into the future. And we know we have not heard the last from Ken Bruffee, whose wise counsel will always be welcome. Combining all that promise with the dedicat-

ed leadership of writing center professionals ensures an adventuresome future for the NCPTW.

NOTES

¹ The NCPTW owes a great deal of its achievement and vitality to the generosity of the many colleges and universities across the country that have hosted the annual meeting: Brown University, Bucknell University, Georgetown University/University of Maryland, Purdue University, Skidmore College, Youngstown State University, Penn State University, University of Kansas, University of Vermont/Champlain College/Trinity College, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Grand Valley State University, Rollins College/University of Montevallo, Colorado College/East Central University of Oklahoma, University of Kentucky, Plattsburgh State University of New York, Merrimack College, Muhlenburg College, Centenary College, and the University of Michigan. In addition, the NCPTW has met twice jointly with the International Writing Center Association, in Minneapolis and in Hershey, Pa. It will meet again jointly in October 28-31, 2008, in Las Vegas, NV.

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