Some Difficulties with Collaborative Learning

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Theories of collaborative learning and collaborative writing are finally gaining recognition. Sessions at the Conference on College Composition and Communication convention devoted to the research and practice of collaborative methods jumped from six in 1987 to eleven in 1988 to twenty-two in 1989. Articles on the subject are appearing in all the major journals with an interest in composition, including College English, the Journal of Advanced Composition, Research in the Teaching of English, and Rhetoric Review. The field even recognizes a list of semicanonical texts: Edwin Mason’s Collaborative Learning, M.L.J. Abercrombie’s The Anatomy of Judgment, John Dewey’s Experience and Education, and Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Also, proponents of collaborative learning often cite Kenneth Bruffee’s groundbreaking articles, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” and “Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay.” Perhaps, then, we should stop and critically survey this phenomenon, if for no other reason than that the term “collaborative learning” applies to such a wide range of pedagogical theories and methods. The support for such theories and methods depends on a truly eclectic body of theory, presupposition, and evidence, much of it not directly related to composition at all. In this essay, I will examine some of the major theories that support collaborative learning in composition, especially the assumptions, evidence, and relationships between theory and practice. I am less interested in the theories themselves, which have received comment elsewhere, than I am in the pedagogical application of the theories.¹

The problem begins with what we mean by “collaborative learning.” The term applies to any pedagogical theory or method that advocates or involves using groups, everything from free group discussions to teach close observation to adults to highly structured systems for organizing lower elementary classrooms into teams of students who have their progress regularly charted in order to earn rewards for their achievements. In composition, the most common forms of collaborative learning are peer response groups and peer tutoring, although various kinds of group projects using teams of researchers, drafters, and editors are also used. I often find it difficult to sort out the claims of collaborative theorists so as to discover just
what kind of pedagogy they are recommending when they champion the benefits of collaborative learning. No matter what particular methods they promote, collaborative theorists can cite an impressive body of theory and evidence in support of their claims. However, I question whether this body of theory provides an adequate basis for a collaborative pedagogy and whether it clearly demonstrates that collaborative methods improve writing.

Usually, collaborative theorists offer three arguments in favor of collaborative learning: (1) traditional classroom methods have failed to teach students what they most require—a critical stance toward authority and the ability to cooperate to solve problems of social concern—and therefore we need to restructure both education and society to promote these values, (2) collaborative learning mirrors the social nature of language and writing, and (3) empirical studies demonstrate the positive effects of collaborative methods.

Collaborative Learning and Social Change

Edwin Mason hotly argues that our present educational system needs to be restructured. He writes, for example, that in our society,

Systems in which the simple right of human beings to relationship, to membership (full membership) of the species and of some protecting group within it, are not recognized; systems in which relationship is not given, but has to be earned—these must be cleared away. We are directly teaching mistrust of humanity wherever we make the young compete for esteem. There is a natural drive towards this which needs no reinforcement; indeed it needs countering and can only be countered by experience of successful collaboration with others in which everybody's self-esteem is enhanced and in which questions of esteem eventually simply fall out of mind. (42)

Mason further argues that our very survival as a species depends on our educational system's ability to foster a new kind of nonhostile, noncompetitive personality in students and an attitude which questions traditional certainties and promotes a new relationship between authority and the larger group. According to Bruffee, traditional pedagogical methods—lecturing, recitation, and their various combinations—subtly teach the opposite values, such as the following:

Knowledge is what a teacher says.
Answers are more important than questions.
Ignorance is the same thing as stupidity.
I am what someone else says I am.
Fear thy neighbor.
Think because it pays off.
Stay in line.
Learning is preparing to do.
Teaching is telling.
The goal of education is to complete it.

(‘The Way Out’ 469)

To Bruffee (and to Mason), the best way to counter these false values is to change "the way students are organized for learning," to create a "poly-centralized collaborative learning community which places faculty at the edge of the action, once they have set the scene, a position from which they may respond to needs which the students discover for themselves" (‘The Way Out’ 465-66).

Bruffee acknowledges the explicitly political nature of collaborative pedagogy; and like Mason, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Kyle Fiore, Nan Elsasser, and other collaborative theorists, he argues that all education is political: "The purpose of education—hence the job teachers are hired to do—is to induct people into the mores and values of ‘the state,’ that is, the prevailing culture" (‘Kenneth A. Bruffee Responds’ 77). Thus, the most significant issues of educational theory and practice involve the mores and values we choose to promote in education and the best way to "induct people" into them.

Of course, it is a matter of personal opinion and judgment whether cooperation is superior to competition, whether a critical stance toward authority is more appropriate than acceptance, and whether knowledge is dependent upon the constraints of time, place, and point of view. All of these propositions are highly debatable, and whether we accept the argument for social change will depend in large part on the degree to which we accept these assertions. But even if we do accept them, I am still not convinced that the best way to accomplish a more cooperative society, a more critical stance toward authority, and a more open and relative view of knowledge is through a particular pedagogical method.

Are collaborative methods necessarily better at teaching the values and abilities that collaborative theorists wish to transmit to their students? At least two arguments seriously question the inherent superiority of collaborative methods for achieving the very goals its adherents cherish. First, I am sympathetic to the values Mason and Bruffee advocate, and yet I learned my values from traditional lecture and recitation methods. I presume others did also. The best of my teachers did not indoctrinate me into one limited view of knowledge or restrict the scope of my questioning. They were open about why they accepted what they held to be true; they respectfully granted other points of view their own arguments and reasons. True, these teachers did control their own classrooms: they did a great deal of talking, and when they promoted discussion, they did so in order to get students to understand a particular point. However, I did not feel manipulated; I did not learn to fear my neighbor or stay in line; I did not come to believe that ignorance is the same as stupidity. Despite the fact that these teachers did not use collabora-
tive methods, they did promote the values of collaborative theory by illustrating a mind at work and by transmitting a set of values by example.

Although there is some empirical evidence that certain collaborative methods are superior to traditional methods in promoting cooperation and even altruism (see Slavin, *Cooperative Learning* 117-18), most of this research has been conducted on highly structured forms of classroom management in the elementary grades. No one, so far as I know, has conducted such studies for methods of collaborative learning. Since traditional methods can be effective, we should not overlook them when we consider some of the problems of collaborative pedagogies.

Indeed, the problems inherent in collaborative methods constitute a second reason for questioning their superiority. Thomas Johnson feels that collaborative methods promote "authoritarian leveling toward the norm through peer pressure," which he associates with the techniques for social engineering used by "Nazism, Fascism, and Communism" (76). Although Johnson's reaction may be extreme, Greg Myers voices similar concern. Myers points out that collaborative methods in most cases do not reflect conditions outside the school or university and that accomplishing the social goals of collaborative theory would require a radical change not just in academic structures but in the entire society: "Our problems will not be solved just by new methods, or new theories, or new knowledge" (170). Social change can only be accomplished by a massive change in attitude and a revolutionary movement to change society based on these new attitudes. Such a revolutionary agenda seems to be beyond the scope of a single pedagogical method.

Even if we grant that a particular pedagogical method can be part of revolutionary change, it is not at all clear that collaborative methods are the best means for accomplishing these social goals. Bruffee, for example, grants that "conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling down of quality" are potential dangers for collaborative learning, but he argues that they can be overcome with "a demanding academic environment" ("Conversation" 652). The impulse of groups to foster conformity, or at best to arrive at consensus, must be in constant tension with the right of group members to voice their individual differences and the creation of an atmosphere in which they feel free to do so. Many of the published reports on collaborative learning indicate that rather than consensus collaboration may promote a wide variety of points of view; students often do not agree in their responses to the work of their peers, and their responses are often quite different from those of their teachers. Thus, collaborative methods seem to have created a dilemma. On the one hand, they may unleash irreconcilable differences in assumptions, values, and points of view; on the other hand, the emphasis on achieving consensus may result in unnecessary peer pressure to conform to what the group decides. Of course, the goal is a proper balance between individual differences and group consensus, but given the tension
inherent in the method, it seems excessive to claim that it is intrinsically better than other pedagogical techniques in achieving a change in values.

The Social Nature of Language

The philosophy that language, indeed all knowledge, is a social product is called social construction. Bruffee writes,

A social constructionist position in any discipline assumes that entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers. Social construction understands reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on as community-generated and community-maintained linguistic entities—or, more broadly speaking, symbolic entities—that define or "constitute" the communities that generate them... ("Social Construction" 774)

Even if we grant the tenets of social construction, however, it is not at all clear that collaborative methods best implement that philosophy. As an example of the reasoning involved in this claim, I turn to "Let Them Write—Together" by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, although Bruffee has made many of the same claims with the same reasoning in his article on social construction. In a schematic form, Ede and Lunsford argue as follows:

- "Learning always occurs as part of an interaction either between the learner and the environment or, more frequently, between the learner and peers."

- "One effect of what we may, without too much exaggeration, call an epistemological revolution is a new view of the role of language, a view which no longer defines language as incidental to the creation of knowledge or belief... but as itself constitutive of knowledge."

- "In this view, an individual writing alone is still participating in social experience, since the language he or she grows into as a child comes with its own rich history. Even when writing alone in a garret, in other words, the writer is not alone."

- Therefore, teachers ought to promote collaborative writing. (120-21)

Obviously, this reasoning assumes a great deal. I understand the warrants of the argument to be these: (1) Classroom practice ought to reflect "real world" experience, and (2) collaborative writing as a pedagogy more effectively models language as a socially constituted medium and knowledge as a social product than individual writing does.

Of course, if all language is social, then all pedagogies that use language are social, too. In some sense, then, all experience with language is "real world" experience, and the question becomes what "real world" experience the classroom should reflect. The language of a lecture or recitation class
could be just as formative in developing a student’s concept of writing as a collaborative pedagogy. The rationale for a lecture class might be that students need to hear language, to listen to concepts being elaborated on and worked through, in order to have models for their own usage and patterns of thinking. The rationale for a recitation class might be that it is modeled after the way children learn language through interaction with others, testing their concepts and usage by trying them out and seeing how well other people understand them. Thus, the claim that language always occurs as part of an interaction between the learner and the environment seems an inadequate premise on which to base a collaborative pedagogy. By the definitions of social construction, all pedagogies use language socially, and the collaborative theorist must demonstrate how collaborative methods more closely model the “real world” than other pedagogies.

Thus, Ede and Lunsford argue that writers interact frequently in the “real world” and that therefore the writing class ought to reflect this reality. Ede and Lunsford base their conclusions on a survey of “200 randomly selected members of six professional organizations” (a total of 1,200), 87% of whom “reported that they sometimes wrote as part of a team or group.” In addition, “59% of those who participated in co- or group writing projects indicated that they found such collaboration to be ‘productive’ (45%) or ‘very productive’ (14%)” (“Why Write” 72, 76).

A number of questions arise here. The most significant, of course, is why writing done by professionals on the job is more “real worldly” than writing done, say, by free-lance writers who specialize in articles for sports magazines or by corporation executives dashing off memos to their subordinates. If writing should reflect “real world” experience, what aspects of the “real world” should it reflect and on what grounds? I would have serious reservations about creating a writing course, even an advanced one, entirely on the model of writing done in professional associations, unless the course were specifically labeled as such.

But another question can be raised about the basis of Ede and Lunsford’s confident assertion that 87% of their professional respondents wrote as part of a team or group. Apparently the figure of 87% is from the unpublished results of a follow-up questionnaire to their published survey. The data published in Rhetoric Review suggests a variety of interpretations. Consider the figures for the amount of time professionals spend writing collaboratively:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Time Spent in Writing Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing with one person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing with small group (2-5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing with large group (6 or more)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(“Why Write” 78)
Note that the professionals claimed they wrote alone an overwhelming 81% of the time. However, that figure may be contradicted by the survey of how frequently the professionals surveyed used the various forms of collaboration:

### Frequency of Organizational Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Patterns</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Group plans and outlines. Each member drafts a part. Group compiles the parts and revises the whole.</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Group plans and outlines. One member writes draft. Group revises.</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. One member plans and writes draft. Group revises.</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. One person plans and writes draft. One or more persons revise draft without consulting the author.</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Group plans and writes draft. One or more persons revise draft without consulting the authors.</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. One member assigns writing tasks. Each member carries out individual tasks. One member compiles parts and revises.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. One person dictates. Another person transcribes and revises.</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

("Why Write" 80)
No more than 34% of the professional respondents use any method of collaboration more than occasionally, and the most frequently used form of collaboration is "One member plans and writes draft. Group revises." The other methods are used about 25% more than occasionally. Once again, the question arises: do these kinds of writing occur frequently enough even in this particular and limited segment of the "real world" to justify an entire pedagogy based upon them? Which of the seven kinds of interaction should we teach—any or all?

Ede and Lunsford suggest that peer response is the best way to introduce students to the realities of collaboration, but the values they find in peer groups have little direct connection with preparing students for the realities of collaboration in the professions:

> We believe that using such peer response groups is the best and most effective way to introduce students to collaborative or group writing. Teachers who use such groups in their classes report a number of benefits: group members provide an immediate, concrete audience, often the first one a student has encountered; interest level is generally high, since students are inherently interested in what their peers think; the teacher becomes a helper rather than a judge; and emphasis is put on revision, with its obvious rewards. ("Let Them Write" 123)

Peer response groups may indeed provide these benefits, but unless Ede and Lunsford want to recommend more particular strategies for guiding peer groups, peer response as it is commonly reported in the literature will not adequately prepare students for the rigors of even one kind of professional collaboration—one member planning and drafting and the team revising—which professionals use more than occasionally only 34% of the time.

Language may indeed be a social construct, and knowledge may indeed be socially negotiated; however, it does not follow that collaborative methods are thereby the best way to teach writing. Such an assertion depends on what aspects of social reality collaborative methods are designed to reflect and how well the collaborative method reflects that reality.

**The Effectiveness of Collaborative Learning**

Ede and Lunsford are confident that collaborative methods accomplish a good deal:

> Evidence in support of this hypothesis [that learning always occurs as part of an interaction between learner and environment or between learner and peers] has been provided by Abercrombie, Bruffee, and Garth, who have studied the collaborative learning process in detail. Their studies confirm that students often learn both skills (such as writing) and content material more effectively and efficiently when they do so as part of a group. ("Let Them Write" 120)
Certainly, several researchers have shown that collaborative pedagogies have positive effects. Students in classrooms which use collaborative methods do seem to develop certain skills and learn certain content "more effectively and efficiently" than by other methods. However, whether these improved skills result in better writing is open to question. The studies most often cited by collaborative theorists demonstrate not improved writing but the enhancement of certain skills which we might call "precursors" to good writing. Take the study by M.L.J. Abercrombie, for example. Abercrombie does not address the teaching of writing at all. Her first study involves teaching medical students how to observe more closely and how to make appropriate inferences based upon these observations. The method which Abercrombie taught her medical students—"free group discussion"—forced students to compare their observations and inferences with those of other members of the group, and in the process the students saw how limited and governed by presupposition their judgments really were.

Similarly, consider Bruffee's essays. He asserts that "students' work tended to improve when they got help from peers" ("Conversation" 638), and he cites a collection of essays on college peer groups edited by Theodore Newcomb and Everett Wilson. But none of the essays in that volume deals specifically with writing instruction. In "The Brooklyn Plan" Bruffee does mention that students working with peer tutors demonstrated an increased ability to think through problems and to relate the concrete and the specific in their writing, but he offers only the most general of illustrations in support of his assertion. He also found that students in the Brooklyn peer tutoring program developed an increased amount of self-esteem.

So it is with the volume edited by Bouton and Garth and cited by Ede and Lunsford, as well as many other studies: few of them analyze the effects of collaborative pedagogy on writing per se. Instead, they demonstrate that students improve such things as feeling good about the class, having better attitudes toward writing, having an increased ability to interact in small groups and participate in discussion, and being able to critically analyze the writing of others. These improvements are valuable in and of themselves and provide, I think, an adequate rationale for instituting collaborative pedagogies. But feeling good about writing and a writing class, being able to interact well in small groups, and being able to critically analyze the writing of others are at best preconditions to writing well.

The studies which analyze the effects of collaboration on writing have much more ambiguous results. Angela O'Donnell and her colleagues (1985) found that pairs of writers working together with few guidelines could produce instructions that were more "communicative"—that is, the instructions included a statement of purpose, used illustrations, referred to illustrations, used and enumerated the steps of the process, and correctly ordered the steps—than writers working alone. However, in a later study (1987) O'Donnell and company found that neither paired writers nor individual writers who
rewrote a set of instructions used this experience to improve their performance on a later assignment. When revising, the pairs of writers did produce more complete instructions than the individual writers, but they also focused on different levels of information: the pairs of writers used more "descriptive information," while the individual writers used more "procedural information" in their revisions. The advantages of group writing in this series of tasks are not clear cut.

Many studies do show that collaboration improves writing, but the pedagogies in these studies are so complex that collaboration alone may not be the reason for the improvement. Most of the activities in these collaborative pedagogies are highly structured, focus on practice (not on talking about writing in general) and provide students with substantial response to their writing; the pedagogies they are compared with are not as highly structured, involve much less practice, and provide students with much less response to their writing. John Clifford’s study is a good example. In Clifford’s experiment, collaborative classes systematically engaged in the following activities: brainstorming, freewriting, small group analysis of the freewriting, student summaries of progress, drafting, small group responses to these drafts, another student evaluation of the draft, and further revision. Almost all of the class time was devoted to workshops of one kind or another. The control classes, however, reviewed grammar and mechanics, analyzed readings from a text, received instruction in "the patterns, strategies, and conventions of traditional rhetoric," and studied samples of student work as examples of rhetorical principles (44). Any additional class time was spent on discussion of the problems in the last assignment and explaining how to do the next one. Clifford’s collaborative classes showed significantly greater gains in a pre/post test evaluation of writing than the control classes. However, it may be that the tight focus of the experimental classes, or the amount of response given at the various stages of the writing process, or even the time devoted to practice contributes as much to the improved writing of Clifford’s students as collaboration.

The studies cited by George Hillocks in Research on Written Composition provoke the same reservations. Hillocks found that an environmental mode and a focus on inquiry were the most beneficial pedagogies for improving writing. All of these pedagogies are collaborative in one way or another. Inquiry techniques ask students to analyze a set of data collaboratively in order to help them "develop skills or strategies for dealing with the data in order to say or write something about it" (211). Environmental modes of instruction also rely heavily on "small-group problem-centered discussions" in order to give students practice in working on "concrete materials and problems, the working through of which not only illustrates the principle but engages students in its use" (122). Like Clifford’s study, which Hillocks cites as an example of the environmental mode, environmental and inquiry
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pedagogies are more highly structured and more focused on practice than the control groups. It remains to be seen, then, whether collaboration, or structure, or time spent in practice, or some combination of factors is the dominant reason for improved writing in these studies.

Adopting a Critical Attitude

When we devise teaching strategies, we need to adopt a critical attitude: we need to analyze claims about the advantages of particular strategies over others, and above all, we need to be aware of the assumptions, reasoning, and kinds of evidence various theorists use to support their claims.

Properly executed, collaborative practices may constitute an effective pedagogy; but to be certain, we need a great deal more evidence—evidence clearly rooted in consistent theory, and tightly reasoned and documented by the methods best suited to test the hypotheses of that particular theory, whether the theory be historical, philosophical, critical, experimental, clinical, formal, or ethnographic, to use Stephen North's terms. We need to know more about the dynamics of groups and the tensions they create between individual creativity and social conformity. We need to know more about exactly what produces effective writing in collaborative pedagogies—the structure, the amount and range of response, or the sheer time spent in practice.

Whether collaborative learning will lead to a new order of social relations, whether it more adequately mirrors language as a social activity, whether it improves writing more than other techniques—all of this is still open to question.

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Notes

1For a sympathetic bibliographical essay, see Trimbur. The only major critical essay I know of is by Myers, but critical response has appeared in letters to the editor by Beade, Foster, and Johnson.
2For example, see Danis, Flynn, Gere and Abbott, Newkirk, and Ziv.
3For an argument that "contingencies specific to an organization" are quite different from those in the classroom, see Harrison.
4For summaries of this research see Bishop, Gere and Abbott, Hill, and Slavin.
5Bruffee asserts that students need to be an "astute and demanding" audience before they can be "clear effective writers" ("Some Practical Models" 641).
Works Cited


—. "Kenneth A. Bruffee Responds [to Thomas Johnson]." *College English* 48 (1986): 77-78.


Difficulties with Collaborative Learning


Johnson, Thomas S. "A Comment on 'Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English* 48 (1986): 76.


Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay of 1988 published in the Journal of Advanced Composition was awarded to Reed Way Dasenbrock at the CCCC meeting in Seattle. This honor, which carries a cash award and handsome plaque, was generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. The award is presented each year at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC annual convention. Dasenbrock’s article, “Becoming Aware of the Myth of Presence,” systematically applies a key Derridian concern—the concept of presence/absence—to the teaching of writing at all levels.

The award of honorable mention, which also carries a handsome plaque, went to William A. Covino for his essay, “Defining Advanced Composition: Contributions from the History of Rhetoric.” This essay articulates the classical emphasis on “the open intellectual play of multiple perspectives” as characteristic of successful advanced writing, a new approach to the contemporary teaching of advanced composition.