Two Related Issues in Peer Tutoring: Program Structure and Tutor Training

Kenneth A. Bruffee

Anyone who sets out to establish a writing workshop, lab, or writing center has at least two issues to resolve. In educational terms, these two issues are complexly interrelated. I will treat them separately here, and hope that their relationship will emerge from what I have to say about them.

The first issue in setting up a writing workshop is whether or not tutoring will be required. Required tutoring is hard to enforce, and programs adopt a number of devices and strategies to make students attend. Most involve penalties. If the penalty for not attending the workshop is severe enough, the assumption is, students will of course attend. This is the advantage of required tutoring. If tutees must attend, however, tutors must deal with reluctant tutees. This is one of the prices of required tutoring.

There is another price. In required tutoring, the tutor's relationship with tutees is almost exactly the same as a teacher's. Required tutoring is not an alternative to classroom learning. Required tutoring is an extension of classroom learning. Tutors do the same thing teachers do, and have similar powers. They are surrogate teachers who give individualized instruction.

The alternative to required tutoring is drop-in tutoring. In drop-in tutoring, students get help voluntarily when they feel they need it, usually because they have been assigned to write a paper in English or some other course. Attendance in drop-in tutoring depends on publicity, teachers' recommendations, and the immediate accessibility of the tutoring facility to student pathways and hangouts. Of course, like required tutoring, drop-in tutoring has a price. One price of drop-in tutoring is that it is seldom regular, and it is not part of an organized program of long-term development. Drop-in tutoring is by definition ad hoc. Another price of drop-in tutoring is that tutors often feel frustrated. Since tutees do not attend regularly, but come in only when they feel they need help, tutors do not often see the results of their work, and seldom, if ever, see long-term growth.

The principal advantage of drop-in tutoring, on the other hand, is its educational nature. In drop-in tutoring, the tutor's relationship with tutees is

Kenneth Bruffee is Professor of English at Brooklyn College, where he trains peer tutors and teaches advanced composition. He chairs the Writing Task Force of the City University of New York and edits the journal, *WPA: Writing Program Administration*.

76

quite different from the teacher's. As a result, a drop-in tutoring facility is more likely to offer an alternative to classroom learning. Drop-in tutoring is not an extension of the classroom. It is another "learning world" entirely. Tutors neither check attendance nor report back to the teacher. They need not even take names. As a result, tutors can, so to speak, take the tutees' side, identifying with their needs and feelings. In this way, tutors can help alleviate one of the basic causes of poor writing: writing anxiety.

So much for the first issue in establishing a writing workshop, program structure.

The second issue in establishing a writing workshop is how tutors are to be trained and supervised. If, in addition to a drop-in structure, a writing work-shop involves undergraduates as peer tutors, drop-in tutoring can be even more effective. This is because peer tutors tend to enhance the quality of the service as an alternative to classroom learning. Tutees tend to perceive older people (such as graduate students tend to be) as surrogate teachers. Indeed, graduate students tend to act that way as well. Undergraduate peer tutors, being more or less equal in age and status with tutees, are more likely to be perceived as "something else"—not teachers exactly, but helpers, friends, at best intellectual companions.

But to achieve this effect, peer tutors must be properly trained and super-vised. There are surely a number of ways to train and supervise peer tutors. But the best way in my opinion is to register them in a credit-bearing course in intermediate or advanced composition. In such a course, tutors will ex-perience the difficulties of writing themselves, while they are tutoring others—in effect, for credit—in the writing lab or other tutorial program. And because their own writing is improving, tutors in such a course experi-ence the whole program as a genuine and important part of their un-dergraduate liberal education. And of course once tutors are trained in this way, they can go on to become valuable members of a paid tutorial staff and ultimately, in some cases, become writing teachers themselves.

In my view the key to sound tutor training and supervision in a course such as this is practicing written peer criticism. Practicing peer criticism has two goals. The first goal is to teach tutors to distinguish and practice three kinds of reading crucial to good tutoring: descriptive, evaluative, and substan-tive. To read descriptively is to examine a paper's form without regard to technical quality and opinions expressed in it. To read evaluatively is to ex-amine a paper's technical quality while holding in abeyance responses to form and substance. And to read substantively is to respond to a paper's argument without regard to form and quality of expression. For example, a *description* of the paragraph you are now reading would say, "it discusses the content of the course mentioned in the previous paragraph by explaining the first of two goals of peer criticism; the discussion first lists, then defines, and finally gives examples of three ways to read." An *evaluative* comment on this paragraph might say, "the paragraph is technically correct (spelling, punctuation, etc.), and generally clear, but it is somewhat mechanically organized and its transi-

tion from the previous paragraph is a bit weak." And a *substantive* comment might say, "I agree with the author that description, evaluation, and substantive reading are three main ways we approach written material, but he has left out stylistic appreciation; in any case, I question whether in actual fact our mental processes can be so clearly divided up and distinguished."

Tutors must learn how to make these somewhat artificial distinctions in a tutor training course so that they can govern their tone when working with an author, and so that they can establish priorities appropriate to that author's needs and level of development. They must learn to make these distinctions too in order to develop as self-aware writers themselves. Learning to read in this mature, critical way is the first goal of peer criticism.

The second goal of practicing peer criticism is to increase tutors' respect for other students' minds, and to increase their ability to work collaboratively. Most students write for one audience only: the teacher. For the rest of our lives, however, we must write (if we write at all) for quite another sort of audience, the audience of our peers. In most academic settings we write mainly to be judged. In real life we write mainly to be understood. Peer criticism helps students experience writing as a real activity in this sense, because in writing peer critiques, tutors write for three audiences whose demands they must try to balance and satisfy. To help the author whose work they are criticizing, they must be clear but tactful. To satisfy their own integrity, they must be honest and truthful. And to meet the standards of the final · arbiter, the teacher, who will evaluate and grade their critical writing, they must be thorough and detailed as well as tactful, helpful, and truthful.[1] Peer criticism is the hardest writing most students will ever do.

Partly because critical writing is such a complex task, most students feel anxious at first about criticizing each other's papers. They fear that other students will be tougher on them than a teacher would be. And they are afraid to write exactly what they think about another student's paper, because they feel somehow it must be a form of ratting on a friend. But through carefully organized, progressive peer criticism, tutors can overcome these fears. They learn that they can comment tactfully and helpfully on another student's work, and they learn that they can profit a good deal from another student's comments on their own writing.

As for developing their own writing, peer criticism teaches tutors quickly that writing is an act of publication—an act of making public what they have on their minds. Peer criticism therefore helps tutors overcome the "privacy bias" which causes many immature writers to hug their writing so closely to themselves. They learn that writing is not intended merely to "express oneself." We write to be understood. To write to be understood requires a willingness to risk being read, habitually and consistently, by a community of people who insist on understanding what they read, but who are at the same time tactful and sympathetic. This kind of community of working writers is what a tutor training class based on peer criticism offers. My experience suggests that writing while engaged in tutoring and its classroom counterpart

peer criticism tends to produce confident, consistent, and readable under-graduate writers.

The tutor training course I have been describing supervises peer tutors as well as trains them. Tutors learn tutoring "techniques" by working with each other as writers and critics. And they learn discipline as tutors not in terms of duty owed to a supervisor, but in terms of the tutors' academic, intellectual, and personal responsibility to each other and to their tutees. As peer critics, in fact, they are genuinely responsible for each other's academic growth, and for each other's well-being in the class. They learn, for example, that if they fail to turn in their papers and peer critiques on time, another student who has to write a critique or second comment on that paper may be severely inconvenienced. That message gets across quickly. If tutors do not write well, other tutors will tell them so, tactfully, but in no uncertain terms. And if they do not write peer critiques of other tutors' papers carefully, thoroughly, and tactfully, the authors of those papers will complain that they are not getting the help they need. Their fellow tutors are short-changing them.

This procedure supervises tutors' work as tutors, and their growth as students, more thoroughly and more productively in an educational sense than any conventional supervisory system could possibly do. From the tutors' point of view, furthermore, this sort of supervision tends to feel to tutors like what it in fact is: being asked to take adult responsibility for the success of an important service to their college. Most tutors respond to this kind of supervision with alacrity. Like drop-in tutoring, training peer tutors through peer criticism provides an alternative to the normal social relations prevalent in post-secondary education, and yet provides a high measure of intellectual and academic integrity and rigor.[2]

Notes

1. I owe this clear delineation of a peer critic's task to a peer tutor, Christopher Guardo.

2. Brooklyn College will offer a five-week Institute in Training Peer Tutors during summer, 1980, and again in summer, 1981, supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The Institute director is Ken Bruffee. The Institute will be based on the course described here and in Paula Beck, *et al*, "Training and Using Peer Tutors," and in Bruffee, "The Brooklyn Plan" (see accompanying bibliography). Application forms may be obtained by writing Marcia Silver, Project Administrator, Brooklyn College Peer Tutor Training Institute, English Department, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY 11210. Applications must be received by February 1, 1981, to be considered for the summer, 1981, Institute.

Bibliography

Beck, Paula, Thom Hawkins, and Marcia Silver, "Training and Using Peer Tutors," *College English*, December, 1979. As practiced in a college, university, and community college.

Bloom, Sophie, *Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring in the Schools*, National Institute of Education, HEW (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Printing Office, 1976). Brief summary of relevant research and

suggestions for further study. For copies, write Publications Office, National Institute of Education, HEW, Washington, D.C. 20208.

Bruffee, Kenneth A., "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring," *Liberal Education*, 64 (December, 1978), 447-68. Explains the educational implications of peer tutoring.

──────────, "Peer-Tutoring Writing Centers," in *Basic Writing*, an anthology of essays edited by Lawrence Kasden and Daniel Hoeber (NCTE, forthcoming). Practical guide to setting up peer tutoring programs.

──────────, *A Short Course in Writing*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, forthcoming, March, 1980). Sections on collaborative learning, peer criticism, and training peer tutors.

Dugger, Ronnie, "Collaborative Learning in a Writing Community," *Change Magazine*, July, 1976. Also anthologized in *Guide to Effective Teaching* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Change Magazine Press, 1978). Describes the Brooklyn College Writing Center.

Klaus, David J., "Patterns of Peer Tutoring" (ERIC #ED 103-356). Discusses the central issues in establishing peer-tutoring programs.

Mason, Edwin, *Collaborative Learning* (New York: Agathon, 1972). Discusses the issues underlying collaborative learning, of which peer tutoring is one type.

Smith, Mark E., *Peer Tutoring in a Writing Workshop* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Xerox University Microfilms #76-9320, 1975). Practical guide for adding peer tutoring to an existing writing workshop program. Bibliography and discussion of theoretical background.

Solinger, Rickie, "A Peer Tutoring Program: The Director's Role," *Journal of Developmental and Remedial Education*, Fall, 1978.

Call for Manuscripts

The Committee on Classroom Practices in Teaching English invites educators at all levels—elementary, secondary and college—to submit manuscripts for the 1980 Classroom Practices publication, which will focus on the theme, "Dealing with Differences in the English Classroom." Articles should describe in detail a single lesson, method or strategy for building the English competence of students in the regular classroom who are physically, emotionally or mentally handicapped, who are non-native speakers of English, who speak a nonstandard dialect, who are gifted and talented, or who are nontraditional students. Manuscripts can range in length from two to ten pages. Two copies should be submitted, with the author's name and address appearing only on a title page attached to the front of the copy. Manuscripts should be mailed before April 15, 1980 to the committee chair, Dr. Gene Stanford, Director, Child Life and Education, Children's Hospital, 219 Bryant Street, Buffalo, New York 14222.