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Author(s): Kenneth A. Bruffee
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Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models

IN THE WORLD which surrounds our classrooms, people today are challenging and revising many social and political traditions which have heretofore gone unquestioned. They are making this challenge not as individuals alone, but as individuals working together in collaborative ways. The social organization they are substituting for traditional forms is likewise in many respects collaborative. Indeed, classrooms remain today one of the few places where people do not organize themselves for collaborative activity. On campuses everywhere, right outside the classroom door, students form their own academic clubs for collaborative study, organizations for self-government, "free university" classes, social groups, film societies, political discussion groups, and activist organizations. Elsewhere, everywhere, collaborative action increasingly pervades our society.

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Louis R. Bruce, has begun a fundamental reform of the Bureau of Indian Affairs that is intended to put the future of the nation's Indians into their own hands. . . . The Commissioner . . . said it was acknowledged that Indian communities

Kenneth Bruffee is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Freshman Writing Program at Brooklyn College. He is author of "The Way Out" (CE, January, 1972) and a textbook, A Short Course in Writing, published by Wintthrop.

and tribes had the right and the authority "to take part in the planning and the operation of activities that touch their everyday lives." (12/3/70)¹

All traffic was halted for nearly four hours tonight on a 25-mile stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike by about 1,000 antiwar demonstrators returning home from Washington. (4/26/71)

Mutual funds will apparently be required, in the future, to let their shareholders vote on whether fund managers should consider the social policies of corporations before investing in their stock. (5/11/71)

Dr. Harvey B. Scribner, the Chancellor of the New York City school system, proposed today that students—along with parents, teachers, and supervisors—participate as advisors in the selection of high school principals. (2/15/71)

City planners have begun to use the term "charette" to describe "a new technique of 'total community planning.' This technique calls for the bringing together of an area's residents for discussions on designing a facility, such as a school, to serve as a multi-purpose center of activity for their community. . . . 'There was never anything like this before,' said one participant. 'Everyone was involved, from white gun clubs to Black Panthers.' . . . The ideas that the

¹The quotations are from *The New York Times*. The irony of the first one is, since the Indian action in Washington last fall, all too apparent.

charette developed proved so innovative that they have astounded and excited a number of city planning officials." (1/6/71)

To reduce the dehumanizing effects of modern factory life, . . . two Swedish automobile makers, Volvo and Saab, have begun to eliminate that pillar of mass production, the assembly line.

As part of a growing emphasis on team production methods, the parts will be brought to the cars and installed by semi-autonomous groups of workers instead of the cars being transported through a gantlet of men, each of whom performs a single, monotonous job. . . .

A spokesman "noted that management was often cool to such programs because, even though productivity may increase, 'humanizing work gives more initiative and autonomy to the worker' so that 'he or she becomes less controlled by the manager.'" (12/28/71)

Some activities similar to these have particular relevance for education. In the women's liberation movement, for example, people have begun to work collaboratively in support groups—sometimes called "rap groups" or "consciousness raising groups"—which subordinate figures of authority during the process of self-development. Likewise, peer-group counseling is helping many young people burdened by such problems as drugs, homosexuality, and parental neglect. In some instances, collaborative learning has also occurred on a massive scale. The Cambodia-Kent State student strike three years ago became one gigantic, nationwide, impromptu seminar in collaborative action. The quality of learning in that seminar is evident in the disciplined and thorough book which emerged from it, *The Organizer's Manual*.² In such

ways as these, people have created, outside classrooms, structures in which learning is integral both with human interdependence and with private inner experience and feeling.

Here and there even teachers have struck on the principle of collaborative learning.

As part of "a growing number of health education programs around New York state, designed to teach preventive medicine concepts to school children . . . new programs are trying to involve pupils directly and to channel peer influence, on the theory that if youths can teach each other bad habits, they can also teach each other good habits.

"The schools . . . put about 30 high school pupils to work last semester as volunteers in the local hospital, doing clerical work, talking to patients, even collecting bedpans. . . . They trained another group of youngsters to counsel their fellow students about drug information, and a third group will be trained as general health counselors.

"There is a real responsibility here. The kids had better learn their lessons well," a spokesman said. . . . "I don't know of a better way to make education relevant. . . . I don't know of any better way to turn kids on than to make them helpful to other people." (6/72)

"Officials of the [New York] State Department of Education said today they were studying a new method for teaching reading which in the last two years has raised the reading scores of students. . . . The system relies heavily on family and community involvement, with students teaching their younger brothers and sisters and slow youngsters in the learning group being assisted by the faster pupils." (3/9/72)

In this second instance, officials would have been neither surprised at student progress in collaborative learning, nor startled at the "newness" of a "method" by which children teach other children, had they read the following passage in

²"By the O. M. Collective," a Bantam Book (Q6516), 1971. Another useful and influential book, indirectly related to the strike, is Saul Alinski's *Rules for Radicals* (Vintage paperback).

Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel*.

He learned to read almost at once, printing the shapes of words immediately with his strong visual memory; but it was weeks later before he learned to write, or even to copy, words. The ragged spume and wrack of fantasy and the lost world still floated from time to time through his clear schoolday morning brain, and although he followed accurately all the other instruction of his teacher, he was walled in his ancient unknowing world when they made letters. The children made their sprawling alphabets below a line of models, but all he accomplished was a line of jagged wavering spearpoints on his sheet, which he repeated endlessly and rapturously, unable to see or understand the difference.

"I have learned to write," he thought.

Then, one day, Max Isaacs looked suddenly, from his exercise, on Eugene's sheet, and saw the jagged line.

"That ain't writin'," said he.

And clubbing his pencil in his warted grimy hand he scrawled a copy of the exercise across the page.

The line of life, that beautiful developing structure of language that he saw flowing from his comrade's pencil, cut the knot in him that all instruction failed to do, and instantly he seized the pencil, and wrote the words in letters fairer and finer than his friend's. And he turned, with a cry in his throat, to the next page, and copied it without hesitation, and the next, the next. They looked at each other a moment with that clear wonder by which children accept miracles, and they never spoke of it again.³

Learning Collaboratively

It seems reasonable to suppose that what young children are capable of in this regard, adults and near adults must be capable of as well. It would seem that college students—Freshmen, Sophomores,

Juniors, Seniors—can also learn with one another and from one another.

Yet students do not as a rule learn collaboratively in our classrooms. We do not ordinarily recognize collaboration as a valid kind of learning. Traditionally, indeed, collaboration is considered irresponsible; in the extreme, collaboration is the worst possible academic sin, plagiarism. We ordinarily expect a student to talk mainly to the teacher, write to the teacher, and, surely, determine his fate in relation to the teacher, individually. Among students we recognize few relationships in the learning process itself. More accurately, we tend to preserve a negative relationship among students. Officially, students are anonymous to one another, and isolated. We turn our back on collaboration which does occur in learning, or we penalize it, or we simply refuse to see it. The odds are very good that Eugene's teacher never knew who taught Eugene to write. Had he known he might well have punished the two boys for disturbing class, or for "cheating." For the children, collaborative learning could be nothing but a clandestine "miracle."

But the examples I have given suggest that in reality collaborative learning is no miracle. No productive, satisfying collaborative activity is miraculous. As Durkheim puts it, collaboration is unquestionably "a very rich activity . . . periods of creation or renewal occur when men for various reasons are led into a closer relationship with each other, when . . . relationships are better maintained and the exchange of ideas most active."⁴ And collaborative activity hap-

³Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel* (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 79. I am indebted to Anthea Hemery for pointing out this passage to me.

⁴*Essays on Sociology*. Quoted by Edwin Mason in *Collaborative Learning* (New York: Agathon Press, 1972), p. 26. A very practical book on collaborative learning is Charity James, *Young Lives at Stake* (New York: Agathon Press, 1972), especially Chapter 3.

pens willy-nilly, even in an educational tradition which militates against it. It will certainly happen at an accelerating pace whenever a teacher conceives of teaching as a process of creating conditions in which collaborative learning can occur.

To create these conditions is not simply a matter of deciding "how much" freedom or discipline a teacher should "give" students. The teacher must reconceive his role. He must become an organizer of people into communities for a specific purpose—learning. He must re-apportion freedom and discipline within the class, thereby establishing a "poly-centralized" collaborative learning community in which the teacher moves to the perimeter of the action, once the scene is set. The central action then is people learning. It is important to see that the teacher does not simply take a laissez-faire attitude, abrogating his responsibility to educate. He reinterprets this responsibility. The teacher understands that his primary job is to organize the learning community, because, as Dewey points out, "community life does not organize itself in an enduring way purely spontaneously. It requires thought and planning ahead."⁵

Generally speaking, the kind of community such a teacher organizes is composed (depending on class size) of an indeterminate number of self-governing, self-teaching, mutually responsible groups of four to six students each. Here are several examples of how teachers have applied this general principle under widely varying conditions.

(I) Recently a young community college teacher⁶ told me she had in effect

re-invented collaborative learning herself. In despair, faced with an introductory literature class of over 130 students meeting in a gym, she divided the class into groups of five to seven people each, scattered the groups around the gym, and told students to discuss the assigned story among themselves.

She gave them a question or two to start with each class hour, and throughout the term she visited each group in turn for an hour or part of an hour each, giving each group a small but intensive and valuable portion of her undivided attention. She lectured to the class as a whole three or four times during the term to give people additional background or ways of approaching the work. In this way, everyone in this gargantuan class had a chance to discuss literature in a fairly intimate and yet guided way three times a week for three months. Under such adverse conditions, "literary study" could hardly be more immediate or intense.

(II) Last year I had a class of fifty-five people in an elective course in Romantic poetry, which by trial and error I turned into a collaborative class in a similar way. I lectured occasionally, usually for the first and last class hour to be spent on each poet. The other classes were devoted to discussion in collaborative groups. I tried at first to change the makeup of the groups from class to class. In failing this I discovered how fundamental and important the coherence of each small group is, especially in a setting of large impersonal classes. Although I had composed the groups arbitrarily at first, after a week or so during which a few people migrated from one group to another, the groups became settled and loyal.

During the collaborative classes, I visited the groups in rotation, working with

⁵John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier, 1963), p. 56.

⁶Ms. Fraya Katz Stoker.

each small group intensively—sometimes in a strongly directive way, especially when I found that people were failing to read carefully. During the first weeks of collaborative work, also, I offered each group a set of questions at the beginning of each class hour to get them started. This gave students a greater sense of security and direction. In addition, before the end of the term, one group began meeting voluntarily outside classtime. They prepared a difficult poem (Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*) and, splitting up, became leaders of the other groups when the time came for the class to discuss that work.

Every person wrote two papers during the term, and each one read and wrote an evaluative critique of at least four papers written by fellow students (two evaluations each assignment).⁷ The students thereby became familiar with each other's work, and not incidentally, familiar with additional works of the Romantic poets. They also developed through practice their critical eye. And the final evaluation of each paper was not based, then, on the views of a single judge, the teacher, but was comprised of the views of a small jury of students as well. Also, two pairs of students wrote their papers in collaboration; in each case, the pair accepted equal responsibility for the result.

⁷To help students learn the evaluative process, I offered them the following optional set of four questions as a guide:

1. What is the "point" of the paper? What does it say? What position does it take?
2. How does it make its point? What does it do to defend or explain its position?
2. Is the paper related to any issue raised so far in this course? If so, which? If not, what context of issues is the paper related to?
4. What are the strong and weak points in the paper? What do you like about it? If what you read was a draft, what suggestions would you make to the writer for revising it?

A curious thing happened in the final exam. Some students felt, because of the way the course had been taught, that they should be allowed to discuss the exam questions in groups before writing the exam. As an experiment, I concurred, giving them the first half-hour of a two-hour exam period for discussion. Two-thirds of the class refused the option. The remaining third formed into two groups. One group was made up of well-prepared students who had been active in group discussion all term. They talked for fifteen minutes and dispersed to write. The other group was made up of students who had been inactive or frequently absent. They spent the better part of the allotted time picking each other's poorly furnished brains, before setting reluctantly to work. The net result of the experiment was to dissipate exam-panic for almost everyone. The one bad effect I half expected did not happen. Unprepared students did not become the parasites of better prepared students, who had neither the time nor the inclination to indulge them.

(III) The year before, I conducted a more advanced and smaller class, a senior seminar in the novel. Less certain of myself at that time, I organized the class more formally, according to the following written "convention."

A Collaborative-Learning Convention

1. The purpose of this convention is to organize class members to teach one another and support one another in learning. Mutual interest and responsibility—affinity, rather than autocratic control—is to create coherence among the members of the class.

2. The first week or two of the term may be a period of orientation. The teacher may direct the meetings, intro-

duce the subject matter, and provide basic concepts which class members are likely to find useful in exploring the material, and in developing their own line of thought regarding it. Students will then declare their interest in units of the subject matter. The teacher will divide the class into collaborative groups of four to six students each, according to the interest declared by each member.

3. Each collaborative group will be responsible to the rest of the class for its own unit of material. Members of the group will decide how to teach the material to the rest of the class, and the emphasis to be made. The group will then direct and govern the class for one to two weeks of the term. Groups may aid discussion by providing supplementary information in written form.

4. Each class member will be responsible individually to the group which is in charge of the class. Each member will also be responsible for his own preparation and for contributing to class discussion. And each member will be responsible for the work his group undertakes in preparing material and directing the class.

5. The teacher's responsibility will be to determine before the term begins the subject matter and written requirements of the course. Both may be revised in negotiation with the class. The teacher will also provide orientation, and act as mediator, as judge in the process of evaluation, and as the class's resident resource. The teacher will provide resources and advice on request, to the limit of his ability, and may also provide unrequested resources he thinks may be useful to the class in their work. The teacher will be available for consultation on request to the class as a whole, to each learning group, and to each indi-

vidual member of the class. He will hold individual conferences with members of the class at least once during the term. Any class member at any time may choose to learn independently with the teacher's guidance.

6. Class members will be responsible to each other and to the teacher for evaluation. Each student paper will be read and evaluated, in writing, by a jury of at least two class members; hence, each student will read two papers as a juror for every one paper he writes himself. After the student jury has considered each paper, the teacher will read and evaluate it, weighing student critical opinion with his own, providing his own written comment, and assigning a grade if necessary.

7. Twice during the term (mid-term and end of term) class members will evaluate their own work, the work of their group, the class as a whole, and the teacher's contribution. Also at these times the class as a whole will recapitulate the subject matter covered. Discussion of the nature and process of the course will be channelled to these limited periods in order to insure coherent, uninterrupted consideration of the subject matter during the balance of the term.

The last sentence in paragraph 5 of this convention is important because it leaves the door open for students to choose alternative ways of learning—in particular, more individual ways—if they find collaborative learning emotionally intolerable, too academically demanding, or not demanding enough.

The convention is admittedly unwieldy, or is likely to seem so at first, because it necessarily specifies many of the social and learning processes which we take for granted in a traditional class-

room.⁸ It is designed, furthermore, for the rigor of advanced study, in order to satisfy the following criteria:

a. Subject matter. A primary consideration in college study. Students should gain an understanding of subject matter which is at least as thorough as the understanding they may be supposed to gain through traditional teaching.

b. Direction. Students should gain increasing confidence in their ability to learn on their own. They should learn how to develop worthwhile purposes in learning, and learn to develop and pursue questions and problems of their own devising.

c. Evaluation. Students should gain increasing confidence and ability in critically evaluating their own work and that of their peers, as well as the subject matter studied.

Learning to Write Collaboratively

The principle of collaborative learning is applied somewhat differently in a composition course than in a literature course, although the assumption remains the same, that students can learn with and from other students. In a composition class, the possibility that collaborative learning is a case of the blind leading the blind is more apparent. But students can be of immense help to each other in learning to write, for several reasons.

One reason is that learning to write is not much like learning anything else. There are few important facts we must learn in order to learn to write. In learning to write, we learn to *do* something,

as we learn tennis, carpentry, or the violin. Yet unlike learning these activities, in learning to write we do not start from scratch. (I am speaking at the moment of native speakers of standard English.) We use a language which we have been fluent in since we were about five years old.⁹ Furthermore, because this language, our principle resource in writing, develops during our earliest years, it is associated deeply in us with feelings and experiences we can hardly ever be fully conscious of.

A good deal of learning to write, then, requires us to become actively aware of what as native speakers we already know. It also requires us to overcome the resistances which seem inherent in writing because we are working consciously with something we would ordinarily prefer to be as little aware of as possible. Therefore for adults or near-adults—that is, for college students—learning to write is in great measure a process of gaining new awareness. Gaining new awareness of any kind is likely to be a painful process. People need some kind of support while undergoing it. And the evidence provided by collaborative activity in the society at large suggests that people can gain both awareness and support as adequately in a small group of their peers, as from the ministrations of a teacher.

Another reason students can help each other learn to write is that a person is, or can learn to be, an astute and demanding audience before he becomes a clear, effective writer, just as a small child becomes an astute and discriminating listener before he can speak. Thus read-

⁸For an analysis of the traditional teaching conventions, see "The Way Out," *College English* (January, 1972), pp. 458-461. Some introductory and articulatory material in the present essay appeared in different form in this earlier one.

⁹For the amount and types of language learning which occur after five, see Carol Chomsky, "Stages in Language Development and Reading Exposure," *Harvard Educational Review* (February, 1972), pp. 1-33.

ing their own work aloud to each other regularly helps students learn to write. The listeners become increasingly capable of detecting lack of clarity, organization, logic, and substance, a development which leads eventually to the ability to write clearly, coherently, and logically themselves. When one student tells another he can't understand what he's heard, that criticism sticks. On the other hand, in practicing listening, as well as in practicing reading aloud, the weak writer begins to develop his own ear for the language, becomes more aware of the criteria of judgment he already maintains, and begins to learn and apply new criteria. In this way, both reader and listener become more demanding of one another's work, as well as of their own.¹⁰

This spiraling effect is typical of collaborative learning. It is the third reason students can help each other learn to write. People themselves learn, when they teach others. Chances are Max learned as much teaching Eugene to write as Eugene learned—maybe he even learned more. What we have all experienced as new teachers, students may also experience when they teach each other. They gain an active knowledge of what they had before known only passively, and they become aware of their ignorance in a practical way, which is the necessary first step to learning more.

The following, and final, example of collaborative learning shows how one teacher applied the principle in a class of freshman composition.

(IV) Recently I visited a colleague's

class.¹¹ To prepare for this class hour, the students had been asked to write five questions, drawing on their reading of a set of assigned essays. About half the students attending (19 that day) had done at least part of the assignment. The teacher divided the class according to that criterion, and then divided the students who had done the assignment, again into two groups of five. She asked the students in these groups to pool their material and agree how they would conduct a discussion of the essays if they were to lead the class. These groups then went to work on their own. Once during the hour the teacher asked each group how they were doing, encouraged them, and answered questions. Throughout the hour she was available to them for information and help.

She formed the other half of the class—those who had not done the assignment—into a single group of nine. She assumed, implicitly, that these people had not completed the assignment because for some reason they were unable to. She sat with the group and led a short discussion of the essays, trying to find out how much each student had understood in reading them. Six of the nine responded readily to her direction, and before the hour was half over, they were completing the assignment on their own. This left the teacher twenty minutes or so to work individually with the three students who had the most difficulty doing the assignment. Thus her students had the option of working collaboratively with other students, or of working alone with the teacher, to get special, individual attention. In the collaborative groups, students could work without instruction from the teacher, at their own pace and drawing on their own re-

¹⁰Reading aloud as an aspect of collaborative learning is discussed further in *A Short Course in Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1972), pp. 71-73, 282, and 287-9; see also pp. 290-301. A related discussion of the "psychological" (that is, emotional) difficulties people have in learning to write may be found on pp. 7-8 and 66-70.

¹¹Ms. Pamela Farley.

sources, or they could reach out to the teacher for help, depending on their need.

The Stress of Change

The examples of collaborative learning I have presented here have all been successful to a marked degree. But teachers vary considerably in their ability to organize classes successfully in this way. The ability can be developed, but it may take time. It took me personally several years of wrestling with my own compulsion to Teach as I was Taught. On the other hand, some of my colleagues seem to have taken to it with little or no inner struggle. Similarly, many students welcome collaborative learning enthusiastically. It is a fact, however, that some feel "forced" if asked to learn collaboratively. Many feel bewildered at first. Few students will know immediately how to go about it. Some will distrust it, or reject it entirely. Teachers should realize that students are uncertain and distrustful for good reason. In being asked to learn collaboratively, they are being asked to do something their whole education has not only left them unequipped to do, but has actually militated against.¹²

Teachers should be prepared, therefore, to help students learn to learn collaboratively. Having set up a collaborative class structure, the teacher might begin by posing problems of increasing generality for each learning group to solve. Beginning with specific questions on the material at hand, the teacher could then pose broader questions, and eventually propose that groups begin discovering the important problems and questions on their own. Finally,

¹²See "Comment and Rebuttal," *CE*, December, 1972.

the teacher could face learning groups with the problem of reaching other people with both the questions and the answers they have come up with—that is, offer groups the problem of creating conditions in which others could learn what they have learned.

This gradual process is one way a teacher may go about progressively "demythologizing" himself as The Teacher in the traditional sense. Students must see their teacher differently if they are to learn well collaboratively. But it is important to keep in mind that the teacher must see himself differently too. Like students, teachers also carry with them "the influence of failed institutions . . . when [they] set out to create anything new."¹³ The teacher will have to be wary of his own tendency (and that of some of his students) to lapse back into the traditional patterns of dominance and passivity. He will find it tempting to "declare [his students] children, rather than adults." This relationship, "which emphasizes and accentuates the [teacher's] strength and the student's weakness . . . the same relationship that exists between an adult and a child,"¹⁴ is at the bottom of the human relations which are normal in a traditional class. It is an attitude which is disastrous to collaborative learning.

At the same time, teachers who are willing to encounter these difficulties may find help in *The Anatomy of Judgment*, by M. L. Johnson Abercrombie.¹⁵ This book discusses a course established to improve significantly the diagnostic

¹³Adrienne Rich, *New York Review*, June 15, 1972, p. 35.

¹⁴These phrases are adapted from an eye-opening short essay on college admissions procedures by a recent high school graduate, Ethan Gorenstein, on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*, July 10, 1971.

¹⁵(New York: Basic Books, 1960).

judgment of medical students. This improvement could be accomplished, Dr. Abercrombie discovered, only through collaborative learning. Similarly useful is *The School without Walls*, by John Bremer and Michael von Moschzisker, which describes an urban high school based in part on principles of collaborative learning. These two books also suggest the range of education—secondary school to professional training—in which

the principles of collaborative learning must play an increasingly important part. Regarding the importance of these principles, Abercrombie clearly implies what Bremer makes explicit: “no changes [in education] will be of any significance unless the social organization of education is totally changed.”¹⁶

¹⁶(New York: Holt, 1971), p. 7. I am indebted to Ronald Gross for directing me to these two important books.