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Problems with Bruffee: Post-Process Theory and Writing Center Opposition

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Putting writing-center theory into practice may sometimes reinforce the hierarchy of the classroom



Tom Truesdell

As an experienced tutor and writing center administrator, I am familiar with the writing center community's efforts to gain respect within the academy by establishing an independent, oppositional identity. We contest the notion that centers are supplemental service entities that exist solely to "back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum" (North 72). Instead of merely supporting instructors and students in established academic disciplines, we argue that centers challenge academia's hierarchical pedagogy by providing a social and collaborative learning environment.

As most writing center theorists know, this collaborative—and supposedly oppositional—orthodoxy is largely based on the theoretical arguments of Kenneth Bruffee. Citing Michael Oakeshott and Lev Vygotsky's claims that thought is actually internalized conversation, Bruffee argues that people learn to think by learning to talk, and thus improved conversation is imperative to improved thought. For Bruffee, then, writing is a displaced form of conversation—thought is internalized conversation, while writing is thought re-externalized. Consequently, writers should be encouraged to engage in conversation during the writing process as much as possible ("Peer Tutoring" 210). If they are involved in conversation, Bruffee argues that writers will be able to master normal discourse and thus participate—to understand and be understood—in the conversation of particular knowledge communities in both the academic and professional worlds. These knowledge communities are

groups of peers “who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions” (“Peer Tutoring” 211).

In many ways, Bruffee’s argument echoes David Bartholomae’s claim that students must approximate the specialized discourse of the academy, or invent the university, “by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy . . . and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline” (624). Pedagogically, Bartholomae claims that teachers must define or identify academic discourse conventions so they can be “written out, ‘demystified’ and taught in our classrooms” (635). Bruffee, however, does not believe that teachers should demystify academic discourse. He instead argues that the traditional classroom does not effectively help students become members of knowledge communities because it is hierarchical, and not collaborative, in nature. Bruffee states that the main reason for this hierarchical framework is teacher distrust of class discussion or peer conversation, which is why he is such a strong proponent of peer tutoring. He believes it is valuable “because it provides the kind of social context, the kind of community, in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers” (“Collaborative Learning” 424). Ideally, peer tutoring models the conversation of knowledge communities by providing a place where all members participate, and contribute, equally.

Many writing center theorists have used Bruffee’s argument to claim that minimalist, or non-directive, tutoring is the best way to create peer conversation. In minimalist tutoring, tutors strive to make the writer do as much thinking and writing as possible through the use of open-ended, exploratory questions: “If, as Bruffee suggests, tutor talk should resemble the way we want our students to approach the writing process, then we must ensure that our tutors talk in open-ended, exploratory ways and not in directive, imperative, restrictive modes” (Ashton-Jones 32). These questions help ensure that the writer, and not the tutor, is the primary agent in a session.

Problems with Bruffee

[F]or writing centers to be more oppositional, critical responses to Bruffee's claims need to be considered.

Although minimalist tutoring does indeed foster a more social and collaborative learning environment, the writing center community’s assumption that this approach opposes traditional academic conventions is misguided. The truth is, we are not as oppositional as we tend to assume. Although our methodology might differ, we ultimately endorse the same learning objectives that the traditional, hierarchical classroom follows. Instead of the directive pedagogy used by many college professors (particularly those outside of the composition field), we use a non-directive pedagogy to help students master and adhere to academic discourse conventions. In other words, whether in the classroom or in the writing center, students ultimately learn to speak the language of the academy.

What many writing center professionals fail to recognize is that this conformity is largely the result of our adherence to the theoretical arguments of Bruffee, whose endorsement of axiological standards, uniform pedagogy, and discourse mastery strongly endorses the ideologies and practices of academia. Therefore, for writing centers to be more oppositional, critical responses to Bruffee’s claims

need to be considered, especially those deriving from post-process theory, a school renowned for its criticism of traditional academic pedagogy and axiology.

Post-Process Theory and Opposition

Like Bruffee, post-process theorists recognize the social nature of writing, specifically claiming that writing is a public, interpretive, and situated process (Kent 1). Because writing is social, however, these theorists also claim that it “cannot be reduced to a generalizable process” (Kent 5). Consequently, Bruffee’s assertion that collaboration should be used to help students master academic discourse conventions is erroneous because conventions cannot be universally defined or mastered: “To see writing in terms of post-process assumptions . . . encourages us to think of writing as an indeterminate activity rather than a body of knowledge to be mastered” (Breuch 116). Along these lines, post-process theorists also rebuke Bruffee’s endorsement of academic discourse because it encourages adherence to a rhetoric of assertion that is “masculinist, phallogocentric, foundationalist, often essentialist, and, at the very least, limiting” (Olson 9). They instead argue that abnormal discourse should be valued and encouraged because it promotes “the resistance and contestation both within and outside the conversation, what Roland Barthes calls acratik discourse—the discourses out of power” (469).

Implications for Writing Center “Opposition”

[I]f writing centers want to be truly oppositional to the academy, they must encourage transgression by promoting abnormal discourse.

At this point, I want to make clear that I passionately believe in the value of writing centers (hence my career choice). And I strongly believe that writing center theory is invaluable in helping our community establish independence and gain much-needed respect within the academy, while concurrently benefiting all teachers of rhetoric and composition. That said, post-process theory undermines the claim that writing centers’ value derives from their opposition to the ideologies and discourse conventions of academia. While many writing center theorists use Bruffee to argue that centers foster a collaborative learning environment that opposes the traditional, hierarchal classroom, post-process theory shows that Bruffee’s claims ultimately endorse academic conventions and practices more than the writing center community admits. Consequently, if writing centers want to be truly oppositional to the academy, they must encourage transgression by promoting abnormal discourse. However, if writing centers continue to encourage conformity to normal discourse—regardless of the method—they risk stifling many marginalized, oppositional voices.

Granted, after much consideration and debate, individual writing centers or the writing center community as a whole may decide not to support such dissent or resistance, which is fine—like other discourse communities, the academy must adhere to some standards and thus inherently practice some degree of exclusion. But, at the very least, we must all admit that current writing center orthodoxy and practice is not as independent and oppositional as we tend to claim. Do writing centers provide a learning environment that differs from the traditional classroom? Yes. Do they encourage writers to challenge academic discourse conventions? Not as much as we, or Bruffee, might like to believe.

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