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AUTHOR Mayo, Wendell; Holt, Mara
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ABSTRACT

Two instructors with different approaches to writing collaborated in the preparation of a junior-level advanced college composition course. Both instructors were concerned about the applicability of the "workshop" in teaching composition, and about the question of how to address authority in the workshops. Students were asked to respond to texts which dealt with the displacement of the individual from society. After 2 weeks of reading, lectures, presentations, videos, private writing, and collaborative exercises, the students undertook their first major assignment. That assignment, a critical response to one of the readings, was workshopped. Later, each student undertook a research paper stemmming from the first paper. The course concluded with more presentations, discussions, and a final essay. The two major papers were workshopped in a circle with the instructor in participation. Students read and wrote comments on classmates' papers before the workshop sessions. During the workshop, following an introduction of the papers by the authors, the instructor conducted discussions of the papers. In a final examination, students described: (1) aspects of the workshop that made them feel like displaced persons; (2) aspects of the workshop that made them feel connected to a community; and (3) how they felt about the workshop. Students described the presence of multiple voices competing in their writing: the voice of institution (discourse within established order), inclination (openness without prohibitions), and the "I" searching for a role in the game of truth. The course gave rise to a creative writing course on the fiction writer and society and an exploration of cooperative learning in creative writing. Responses were similar to those from the composition class. From this collaborative process, students gained a greater awareness of self and society, private and public writing, and authority as institution and as social construct. (SG)

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Wendell Mayo
Indiana University-Purdue University
at Fort Wayne

Mara Holt
Ohio University

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Wendell Mayo
Indiana University-Purdue University
at Fort Wayne
Department of English and Linguistics
Fort Wayne, Indiana 46805

Mara Holt
Ohio University
Department of English
Athens, Ohio 45701

# Negotiated Course Design: Hybrid Applications of Pedagogy in Writing Courses

## 1. Introduction

Kenneth Bruffee, in his 1984 essay, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'," suggests that if we reconsider the sources of student authority in writing courses, it follows that sources of teacher authority are likewise open to consideration.

> [C]ollaborative learning helps students understand how knowledge is generated . . . however, our authority as teachers derives from the values of a larger community. . . . [I]ts interest is to bridge gaps among knowledgeable communities and to open them to change. (650)

Bruffee seems to suggest that one of the principal assumptions of collaborative learning—the demystification of authority for students—is related to our ongoing reassessment of our authority as teachers, our ability to deny its centeredness in ourselves, and to "open" our pedagogical stances to "change." If students are encouraged to collaborate in writing courses, then why not teachers in the design and implementation of writing courses? With this rationale, two instructors, Mara Holt and Wendell Mayo, collaborated in the preparation of a junior-level advanced composition course. Mara Holt brought collaborative learning to the design of the course and an understanding of writing as socially-constructed. Wendell Mayo, a graduate of an MFA creative writing program, contributed experience in the creative

writing workshop method and a strong interest in personal voice. The collaboration was an opportunity for a cross-pollination of teaching methods in writing courses. For example, the creative writing workshop "method" was introduced into the advanced composition course; conversely, aspects of rhetoric and collaborative learning were introduced into a creative writing course.

Typically, we think of the recent impetus for change in approaches to teaching writing as coming from the rhetoric and composition community; this is for the most part true, especially in the area of collaborative learning. Bruffee observes: "[In 1982 collaborative learning] appeared for the first time on the list of topics . . . for discussion at the CCCC annual convention. It was eighth or ninth on a list of ten items. [In 1983] it appeared again, first on the list" (635). As a result of the rapid changes in rhetoric and composition, teachers of creative writing are also beginning to feel the need to recognize this shift. In 1989, Joseph Moxley, in his essay "Tearing Down the Walls: Engaging the Imagination," called for a reconsideration of creative writing theory and practice:

> As a whole, composition research and the anecdotal accounts of professional writers challenge us to reconsider our theories of creativity and practices. Ultimately, our increased understanding of what writing involves suggests that creativity is the natural consequence of learning, involvement, and commitment. For this reason, I believe we need to reevaluate the assumption that only a chosen few are capable of creative writing or creative thinking. (28)

The purpose of this essay is to discuss 1) the process by which the instructors —each with fairly different approaches to teaching writing—

collaborated in the design of an advanced composition course, 2) the implementation of the design in the classroom, 3) student perceptions of their authority as writers in the course, and 4) the use of the design for the composition course in a creative writing (fiction) workshop.

2. Instructor Collaboration and Design of the Composition Course

The instructors met several times to prepare the course. In the initial meetings, the instructors shared approaches to teaching writing for possible incorporation into the course. Both instructors were specifically concerned about the applicability of the "workshop" in teaching composition, a method commonly used in creative writing courses. The workshop method assumes that writing is initially private and that writers are assisted in revision by direct discussion of each student's text by ten to fifteen students sitting in a circle, all of whom are in joint apprenticeship to an instructor. Eve Shelnutt, a teacher of creative writing, feels that the workshop method has a drawback because "students are rarely . . . able to avoid seeing the teacher as an authority figure" (167). The instructors recognized this limitation, but they also felt that the workshop method might be an efficient way of getting student texts in front of peers for feedback as well as a kind of classroom "publication" for students.

Mayo was also concerned that more and more graduate students teaching composition may be employing the workshop method. According to the February, 1990 Associated Writing Programs Chronicle, since 1975 the number of institutions offering creative writing concentrations has increased ten-fold for BA's, four-fold for MA's, and six-fold for Ph.D's (22). To the extent that graduates of creative writing programs, schooled in the workshop method, are called on to teach undergraduate composition, how effective is that specific method? Harvey Kail and John Trimbur, writing about rhetoric and composition,

suggest that writing students have a need to "unlearn" traditional, hierarchical concepts of knowledge and to negotiate authority with peers. This is consistent with Shelnutt's observation as a teacher of creative writing. How effective is the workshop method in engendering or impeding this renegotiation of authority?

The instructors then turned to the question of how to address authority. Both instructors had been looking to introduce cultural studies into a writing course. As John Trimbur observes in his essay "Cultural Studies and Teaching Writing," the recent improvement in material conditions for the teaching of composition, the "cultural struggle over the meaning of literacy" and the resulting "crisis of canon," as well as the rise of post-structuralism have combined to make teachers "less willing to accept the old conditions and the old explanations." Trimbur argues that an "approach to cultural studies . . . offers important leads in our thinking about how an emergent political discourse might talk about our work, our sense of ourselves, and our traditions as writing teachers" (6). This, coupled with the desire to sensitize students to the issue of authority in the workshop, governed the choice of readings and assignments. Students were asked to read and respond to texts which dealt with the displacement of the individual from society. Lectures, special presentations (for example, on alcoholism and AIDS), and videos were also included. For example, Holt chose Rose Weitz's essay, "What Price Independence? Social Reactions to Lesbians, Spinsters, Widows and Nuns," Gordon Allport's study, "Formation of In-Groups," and the film "Torch Song Trilogy." These were combined with Mayo's choices: Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Displaced Person" and an excerpt from Fyodor Dostoevsky's <u>Notes from Underground</u>, which contains specific references to writing and isolation.

So the selection of subject matter—the focus on the interplay between

the individual and society—and the implications of this for writing, was an important unity in the course. This focus on the dialectic between self and society helped unite the different theoretical areas and the different approaches to pedagogy that each instructor brought to the design. In fact, the different approaches to pedagogy, knowledge as writer-based (albeit under the tutelage of the workshop and its instructor) and knowledge as socially-constructed (exemplified by forms of collaborative learning), mirrored the subject matter and treatment of it in the course. Additionally, the instructors discovered that if students were aware of the issue, then they might better articulate how they felt about writing, authority, and the workshop method.

Classroom pedagogy was primarily based on a modification of the creative writing workshop method and to a much lesser extent collaborative learning. Classes were combined for lectures, presentations, and videos. Due to time constraints, the instructors decided to separate classes for the workshops, the small group discussions, and the collaborative exercises (one instructor present per classroom). The instructors also decided to meet at least once per week and as necessary to discuss course administration, such as the scheduling of activities and grading.

3. Implementation of the Course Design

The first two weeks of class were devoted to reading, lectures, presentations, videos, private writing, and collaborative exercises. During the next two weeks, students' first major assignment, a critical response to one of the readings, was workshopped. More subject matter, including research methods, was presented and discussed the next two weeks. Students' second major assignment, a research paper stemming from their first paper, was then

workshopped. The course concluded with more presentations, discussions, and a final essay examination.

One collaborative exercise, conducted early in the term, was particularly revealing. Students were asked to read Dostoevsky's description of writing in isolation in his Notes from Underground. Speaking from his "mousehole," the Underground Man tells us: "Now, in my case, I'm writing this just for myself . . . I'll never have any readers" (122). Students also read the "Introduction" to Bruffee's A Short Course in Writing: Practical Rhetoric for Teaching Composition through Collaborative Learning. Bruffee writes: "Through writing and reading we take part in a conversation going on in human beings throughout the world" (2). Students formed small groups of four to five. They compared the Bruffee and Dostoevsky texts and then were asked to try to reach agreement on the following question: "In your opinion, is writing a more social than an isolated act or is it more isolated than social?" Students in each group were asked to record any agreement and disagreement. Each group shared its results with the whole class. Generally, there was a great diversity of views. For example, in Mayo's class only one group out of four was able to reach agreement. Opinions in the other groups ranged from writing being exclusively isolated to exclusively social. This exercise seemed to indicate that continued work in the dialectic between self and society would be productive in the course.

The two major papers were workshopped in the big circle with the instructor in participation. Drafts of student papers were collected and the instructors had copies made at a copy center. Students picked up the collected essay drafts, paid for them, read them, and wrote comments on their classmates' essays in advance of the workshop sessions. During the workshops, the authors introduced their papers, and then were silent as the instructor

conducted a fifteen minute class discussion of the draft essay. Students were asked to use methods of responding to texts outlined in Peter Elbow's and Pat Belanoff's Sharing and Responding as well as more conventional critiques. At the end of a discussion of a student's draft, the instructor collected the written peer responses from all students. The instructor reviewed these responses overnight, graded them, and returned the copies to their respective authors the next day.

4. Student Perceptions of Writing, Authority, and the Composition 'Workshop'

The instructors hoped that the introduction of writing, self, and society into the course would help students articulate their feelings about authority in the workshops. Students reacted to this in their final examination essays.

The final examination was a three-part essay question which asked students to 1) describe aspects of the workshop during which they felt like displaced persons (to borrow the term in Flannery O'Connor's short story), 2) describe aspects of the workshop during which they felt connected to a community, and 3) conclude by explaining how they felt about being "placed in" or "displaced from" the workshop. Students were also asked: In which situations did you feel confident and authoritative about your writing or the converse?

Student final examinations revealed three general reactions to the workshop method. Students described the presence of a multiplicity of voices competing in their writing. Students seemed to struggle with three voices described by Michel Foucault and discussed by Kurt Spellmeyer in the context of the self in discourse. One voice is that of the "Institution," where discourse is within an established order. A second voice is that of "Inclination," one which "dreams of a language without prohibitions." The third voice is that of Foucault's persona, the "I" searching for a role in a

game of truth (Spellmeyer 716).

One group of students, concerned with the consensus in the workshop, described their struggle with the voice of a surrogate institution. One student suggested that "[The workshop] is good practice, but it gets confusing because [as writers] . . . we must decide who [is] right." Another student observed: "[I]n order to write effectively, you have to overcome . . . differences in opinion [in the workshop]." Another student felt that other writers "put their knowledge into my paper." One student seemed to articulate the problem best: "A lot of my feeling of displacement stems from my inability to believe in what I have written. . . . The moments I noticed my feeling of displacement . . . most [were those when I anticipated] the reaction of my peers [to] my paper." Students seemed intimidated by the workshop in their roles as writers, but they felt very positive in their roles as critical readers. They felt connected to the group when they played the role of "Institution" themselves. A student remarked, "[T]he only time I [did] not feel displaced . . . [was] when I [was] reviewing someone else's work."

A second group of students, preferring outright isolation, seemed to be hearing the voice of "Inclination," and refused all rules of the game. Students in this group felt more powerful and in control when they isolated themselves from the workshop—a version of civil disobedience. These students felt more comfortable when they resisted or transgressed the implicit consensus or norms. The need of these students to reject the workshop seemed to be a function of their increased awareness of self and society in the readings and exercises in class. A student declared, "Workshop was a time when I [as a writer] had to stand alone." Another student wrote, "[In the workshop] I [felt] displayed as a model of my beliefs. . . . We often view [displacement] as being bad, when in actuality we're displaced all the time.

Not only as writers but as people. . . . We are displaced when writing because we all have different tales to tell." It is encouraging that students, made aware of the issue of displacement, were not afraid to resist and to stand outside of the workshop. "Thanks, but no thanks," a student suggested in this context. In her examination essay, one student described her mother as a writer who successfully resists a community and at the same time is accepted by it. She wrote, "My [mother] is a poet (she's even been published) and a pretty radical feminist. She seems to want to be displaced. She thrives on being different and she gets attention [to her work] that way."

A third group of students actively sought alternatives to the surrogate institution, yet did not want to be all together displaced from it. These students seemed to struggle with their roles as writers in a game of truth. Troubled by the implied consensus, this group of students looked outside of the workshop for feedback on their writing. Even when their work was generally praised by members of the workshop, some students sought second opinions from members of their smaller, collaborative groups or other persons. One student wrote, "It was when I was alone and had no [immediate] feedback coming in from [the workshop] that gave me problems. . . . I would, on occasion . . . call up [another student] to ask for feedback." But sometimes these outside sources of feedback seemed disappointing to students, and they found that they needed to continue the "game"—to revise and to seek more sources. One student observed: "My mother read [my workshop draft] and told me it was too repetitious . . . and my father then explained to me what [a key aspect of my paper] <u>really</u> meant. I decided I was trying to take my parents' understanding, rather than maintaining my own." Although the "game" seemed to result from the crisis of self and society introduced into the course, many students seemed to enjoy the challenge. One student responded, "[It was] . . . a way to share myself with

others."

Since the "Displaced Person" was selected as subject matter and collaborative work was employed to make students aware of the issue of placement versus displacement, students' instinctive rejection of some aspects of the workshop seems connected to what Kail and Trimbur call the need to "unlearn," to dissociate from "official structures," and "to demystify the authority of knowledge and its institutions" (10-11). Students struggled with the issue of self and society in their writing, but the fact that students were made aware of the issue seemed to help them manage the situation. Although Spellmeyer suggests that the voices of "Institution" and "Inclination" are both "reassuring and deceptive" (716), students were generally conscious of the tension between these oppositions--oppositions which were introduced to the design of the course from the outset to create a "gap" students could endeavor to bridge in their approaches to writing.

Along with this productive kind of tension, students in all three groups generally felt comfortable with one particular aspect of the workshop. A student observed, "[A]ll too often, we, as writers, get on a roll, and when we start, there's no stopping. This is when [mechanical] mistakes occur, and . . . when the workshop proves to be very beneficial." Kail and Trimbur suggest that peer tutoring is an effective "form of social organization to negotiate the crisis [of authority] successfully and [to] reenter the official structures of authority" (11). The writing workshop, as opposed to collaborative learning, seems to make the most sense in the reentry phase, a place for students to publish, share, and polish their work, but not to create or shape it--and certainly not to resolve the crisis of writing and the self observed in student final examination essays. If limited in this way, the workshop can be a productive part of an overall collaborative strategy in

composition courses, but it should not be the only strategy.

5. Application of the Composition Course Design to a Creative Writing Course

Another benefit of this cross-pollination of collaborative learning and the creative writing workshop is the set of theoretical questions it raises. For example, should we redefine the traditional approach to teaching creative writing in terms of collaboration and post-structuralist concepts of the self? Mayo explored this issue the following term while teaching a junior-level creative writing workshop. Notions of the fiction writer and society were introduced. Reading matter was similar to that assigned in the composition course. The readings generally pointed to instances of displaced persons in society: Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," Anton Chekhov's "The Lament," Catherine D. Miller's essay "The Use of Contemporary Culture in American Fiction," and Marianne Hauser's "Literary Cross-Dressing" are examples. Mayo asked creative writing students the same question which had been posed to composition students: "Is writing an isolated or a social act?" Again, students had a diversity of opinions.

Mayo began another line of inquiry in the creative writing workshop: "How effective is collaborative learning in a traditional creative writing class? What are creative writing student perceptions of their authority in a collaborative setting?" To answer this, students were asked to write three short fictions. Students conceived of and wrote the first short fiction privately and distributed copies to classmates. All students brought their copies to the "big circle" discussion in which the instructor participated. Students wrote the second short fiction privately, then shared it in small collaborative groups without the instructor present. In these small groups students provided each other with detailed peer responses to structured exercises covering issues in editing, structure, clarity, total effect and

others. One group member recorded the proceedings and reported them to the class as a whole. The third fiction was written independently of either small or large groups and shared with the instructor in one-to-one conferences. The time budgeted for peer-response to stories was about the same for all three student fictions--about fifteen minutes each--whether they were in the workshop or small groups. All fictions were discussed with the instructor in conference after the group sessions.

Creative writing students were asked to respond to the same questions that the composition students had responded to regarding their perceptions of authority, but this time they generally expressed their feelings about the collaborative aspect of the course, not the workshop. Most students felt more in control of their work in the collaborative groups because they could "more easily respond to comments," "the group paid more attention to details," and "everyone would say something." Several students felt that the smaller collaborative groups spent more time discussing their fictions, which is a curious response since the small group exercises were structured so that the same amount of time for peer critiquing was allotted for all three fictions.

Creative writing students felt the same as composition students had about the big circle workshop. Some felt the voice of the institution: "I felt out of control when there was disagreement within the group as to the 'meaning' or point of [my] work." Other students were inclined to distance themselves from the workshop and to reconcile themselves to the writing later: "As far as authority in the workshop, I felt almost none during the actual process, but a great deal afterwards." Like the composition students, creative writing students limited their praise of the big circle workshop to the sharing, "publishing," and polishing of their texts. Curiously, creative writing students seemed to be more sensitive to the instructor's presence in the

workshop: "Neither workshop took away my sense of ownership, of my control over my pieces. I suggest that either workshop [the small groups or the big circle] could have intimidated me if they were run in an intimidating way. Neither was." It may be that creative writing students come to workshops with different expectations about writing than do composition students. Perhaps they expect a more "hands-off" environment, a writer-centered environment based on the autonomous self--echoes of Foucault's voice of "Inclination." This is paradoxical when one thinks that the traditional pedagogy of the creative writing workshop can be anything but hands-off (depending partly on the management style of the instructor).

Although creative writing students expected a degree of apprenticeship to the instructor, they seemed to prefer the peer-collaboration in the small groups. This may be related to the overall reaction of both composition and creative writing students to workshopping versus collaborative learning: students preferred collborative learning in the developmental stages of writing and the workshop in the final stages of work.

It should be noted that two creative writing students asked to collaborate on one fiction in the course and they did so successfully. They kept a joint log of the issues they faced in the collaboration. Many of these issues were the same ones faced by the students in general: when to resist, who to listen to, and the kinds of feedback which are useful and the kinds which are not.

6. Conclusion

We will close as we started, with a quotation from Bruffee:

> [Collaborative learning] challenges the authority of knowledge by revealing, as John Trimbur has observed, that authority

> itself is a social artifact. This revelation and the new awareness that results from it makes authority comprehensible both to us as teachers and to our students. (649)

Students responded in a variety of ways to the settings in which their writing was discussed in the composition course and in the creative writing course. But students were consistently challenged to work with a process of writing which demands attention to the issue of the self in writing. Some students concluded that to control one's writing one must not succumb to the voice of the institution, or the temptation to forge dissonance into a false sense of harmony. Some students seemed to sense that the game of the self is a game of synthesis, and that synthesis is a knowledge-quest in itself. Raising student awareness of these issues—self and society, private and public writing, authority as institution and authority as social construct--is one of the major benefits of collaborative teaching, especially when oppositional theoretical or pedagogical stances are introduced not as "subject," but when they are introduced to create a productive pedagogical "gap" which students and teachers can observe, work with, and strive to bridge in their quest for a voice, something to "say." Even when instructors have fairly different approaches to teaching writing, they can successfully negotiate wholly-new "hybrid" approaches through collaboration in the choice of subject matter, ways of seeing the world, and ways of seeing the role of the writer in it.

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