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ON NOT LISTENING IN ORDER TO HEAR: COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND THE REWARDS OF CLASSROOM RESEARCH

Editor's Note: *This is a keynote address Kenneth A. Bruffee gave in the fall of 1987 to the annual regional meeting of the Community College Humanities Association. Because the audience for this talk included basic writing teachers, and because we think that the message of this talk can enhance the teaching of basic writing, we are honored that Professor Bruffee is putting his speech on record in the* Journal of Basic Writing.

I'm going to do something today that I hardly ever do in an address. I am going to risk boring you into a state of marginal apoplexy by telling you a bit of my own intellectual history, the history of my early work with collaborative learning. I take that risk in order to make a point that I hope you will consider in relation to your own life and work. My point will be that as community college teachers of the humanities, you have a unique opportunity, it seems to me, both to foster genuine, positive change in the students you teach and, through a disciplined process of "classroom research" that I will describe later, to document significant aspects of American cultural life.

I hasten to say that in using the word "cultural" in this context I am not talking about spiritual uplift: peddling Blake to the benighted and Mozart to the masses. I am using the word with a small "c," in the sense that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz uses the term in his remarkable

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book *Local Knowledge*, and I am using it in place of such possible alternatives as "social" or "political." I prefer to talk about the "cultural" aspects of American life that teaching humanities in community colleges touches, and I prefer to say that community college humanities instructors have an opportunity to document that "cultural" life, because I intend the word "cultural" to convey something both broader and deeper than either word, "social" or "political," conveys, at least to me. "Cultural" is a broader term because it is all-inclusive. It subsumes what most of us call political and social. And it is a deeper term, because it gets at a level of relations among human beings that is more complex and obscure than anything that all but a very few analysts of a political or social bent ever reach. What I call "cultural" includes such things as family rituals, ethnic customs and values, "common sense," vocational or professional knowledge and expertise, and, above all (or rather, beneath all), the language we speak.

To develop this notion, what I have to say here today is divided into two parts. First, I will try to suggest the nature of collaborative learning in terms of the personal intellectual history I warned you about. And second, I will give a brief account of some "classroom research" that is related to "cultural" issues I have just sketched. My point will be that community college instructors are ideally situated to undertake "classroom research" on issues of this sort. The diversity and cultural origins of the students that fill your classrooms offer you an opportunity to document issues such as these to a depth that I think rarely occurs in professional literature.

I. Intellectual History

When I first encountered collaborative learning, in the early 1970s, the truth is I really didn't know what was going on. That was partly because it wasn't happening to someone else. It was happening to me. It has only been by unpacking that experience over the past fifteen years, by reading broadly and trying to write about the experience and talk to others about it as I am talking to you now, that I began to understand it.

What happened, briefly, as I remember it, was this. In 1971, the first year of open admissions at The City University of New York, I took on the job of Director of Freshman English at Brooklyn College. What I did in that job was organize, more or less from scratch, a program of courses in writing at all levels. I also taught remedial writing classes and freshman comp. in the program and tried to teach other teachers how to teach those courses.

Of course, I really didn't know in any systematic way how to do any of those things. So I made a desperate attempt, along with a handful of colleagues who were directing writing programs at other City University of New York colleges, people such as Donald McQuade, Mina Shaughnessy, Harvey Wiener, and others, to try to understand the difficult new task we had committed ourselves to.

In the course of that collaborative and—from my point of view—highly productive process, all of us made some striking discoveries about ourselves as well as about our students. In fact, what we found out about our students was not unlike what we found out about ourselves, and we made both of these discoveries through the same collaborative process. We began working together because we had all discovered that as open admissions writing teachers and as directors of open admissions writing programs we had more in common with each other than with many of our colleagues on our own campuses. We had also acknowledged to ourselves that what we were supposed to be doing we simply didn't know how to do.

As part of trying to find out how to do what we were supposed to be doing, we agreed to meet and talk. We began converging Saturday mornings on a mutually convenient Manhattan coffee shop, sometimes in the University's Graduate Center, sometimes not. I remember vividly that we met several times at a wonderful soup shop that had just opened on Fifth Avenue called La Potagerie. We had a pretty good time. To focus our discussions in the midst of all this medium-high living, we decided to give ourselves some reading assignments. We chose several texts that one or another of us had run across in some context or other and that seemed to offer some help in looking at the needs of our students, if possible in a larger than merely academic context.

One of the first texts we read together was Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, a book that talks about the families of blue-collar workers living in and around Boston. These families had a lot in common with the family I had grown up in and, as we eventually learned from each other, with the family life many of us in the group had experienced. They also had a bit in common with the families of the students we were teaching. One of the first and most important things that Sennett and Cobb suggested to us was that teaching writing to open admissions students might raise issues that were more profound than simply how to "correct errors." Teaching writing might in fact involve an issue that seemed altogether beyond our professional training and expertise to understand: the issue of acculturation.

It began to dawn on us, in short, as we read and talked about what we read, that our students, however poorly prepared academically, did not come to us as blank slates. They arrived in our classes already deeply acculturated, already full-fledged, competent members (as we were too) of one or another cultural community. In fact, they were already members of several interrelated cultural communities. If that was the case, we concluded, then in the first instance the way our students talked and wrote, and even the way they behaved in class, did not involve "errors" at all. They talked, wrote, and behaved in a manner that was perfectly correct within the cultural community they were currently members of. The way they talked, wrote, and behaved was "incorrect," we found ourselves saying, only in terms of a cultural community that they were not—or were not yet—members of. The cultural community the students were not yet members of and were asking to join by virtue of committing themselves to attend college was of course the, to them,

alien community of the "literate" and the "liberally educated."

Beginning to describe our students in this new way, we also began to talk about our job as their teachers in a new way, a way that differed strikingly from the way we were in the habit of talking about teaching. If how our students talked, wrote, and behaved was not in the first instance a matter of "error," then, we began to say, perhaps our job as teachers was not in the first instance to correct them. We recognized of course that what the cultural community of the "literate" and the "liberally educated" regarded as correct and incorrect talk, writing, and behavior remained an issue. But what we were now saying was that in the first instance our job as teachers was to find ways to begin and to sustain a much more difficult, painful, and problematical process than "correcting errors." Our job as teachers, we were saying, was to find out how, in some way and in some measure, to reacculturate the students who had placed themselves in our charge.

My point here, you see, is not so much about our students as about us, their teachers. My colleagues and I were beginning to talk about education in general and teaching in particular in a way that was quite different from the way we had ever talked about it before. And the change in the way we talked about what we were doing signalled a cultural change in ourselves. In fact, I would say now, the change in the way we talked about education and teaching was more than a signal of change. Change in the way we talked was the cultural change itself that we were undergoing. The language we were now using literally constituted the small transitional community of which we were now devoted members. Learning as we were experiencing it was not just inextricably related to that new social relationship among us. It was identical with it and inseparable from it. To paraphrase Richard Rorty's account of learning, it was not a shift inside us that now suited us to enter new relationships with reality and with other people. Learning *was* that shift in our language-constituted relations with others.

Furthering this process of reacculturation we were experiencing, another text we assigned ourselves to read and talk about was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's book, as you recall, is about teaching reading and writing to the illiterate poor in Brazil, and it has an unmistakeably Marxist slant. Now, I don't think any of us in our group would have called ourselves Marxists. Looking at us around a table in that Fifth Avenue restaurant, certainly, no outsider would be driven to that conclusion. I think, in fact, that for the most part we had a bias that was fairly typical of early-Nineteen Seventies academics: a bias that was mostly white, mostly male, and solidly American middle-class.

Despite that bias, however, we were fully aware that many of the students we taught were in a sense forced to pursue postsecondary education, largely through economic pressure, by society that paid workers better who were literate in the standard dialect of English than those who were not literate in it. A job at the telephone company turned up as a point of reference, and the high proportion of those who as recently as last summer, failed the New York Telephone company entrance exams suggests that that was not a wholly unfair criterion. Yet one thing

we learned from Freire was that our middle-class American goal of establishing literacy in the standard dialect was shared by at least one person whose basic political assumptions differed quite a bit from our own. This goal of literacy in the standard dialect is one that you and I continue to share today, of course, especially as larger and larger numbers of non-English speaking students enter our classes.

Stirred by these marginally political concerns, our discussion of Freire began by addressing the troubling key word in his title, the term "oppressed." I think we all found the word somewhat melodramatic as applied to open admissions students. Some of you may feel similarly reluctant to apply it to the students in your community college classes. But we had to admit also, without casting aspersions as to the source of that condition, that to say that our students existed in a state of "oppression" was not entirely inappropriate. Sennett and Cobb had taught us that our students had been acculturated to talk to and deal effectively only with people in their own crowd, their own neighborhood, perhaps only in their own family or ethnic group.

We now saw that acculturation to those perfectly valid and coherent but entirely local communities alone had confined our students severely and had sharply limited their freedom. It had prepared them for social, political, and economic relations of only the narrowest and most limited sort and had closed them out of relations with the broader, highly diverse, integrated American cultural community at large. As a result, their local acculturation prevented many of them from discovering their own buried potential and from living more economically viable and vocationally satisfying lives. We suspected (given our middle-class, professional, liberal-humanistic bias) that our students' acculturation also prevented them from living lives that were intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically fulfilling. We realized of course that this was not exclusively an "open admissions" problem. Local parochialism of experience and thought is a problem that, on William Perry's testimony, is not unknown even at Harvard College.

So, although we knew that what Freire meant by the key word in his title, "oppressed," was not exactly what we meant by it, to the extent that our more liberal sense of the word did correspond with Freire's intent, the word led us in a useful direction. In order to make any positive impression at all on the students we were encountering in our classes, it was clear that we too needed a pedagogy of the "oppressed," even in our more pallid sense of the word. The pedagogy that Freire offered turned out, furthermore, to be something we had come across before in our reading, and would come across again used to accomplish a similar end. The feminist movement of the Sixties and Seventies, for example, had used this pedagogy to help women change their attitudes toward themselves and to reconstruct their role in society. Kurt Lewin had used it to help people accept dietary changes caused by food scarcities during World War II and to liberate children and adolescents who had been raised as Hitler Youth. A pedagogy that could relieve or overcome "oppression" in many relevant senses, we began to see, would inevitably be a pedagogy of reacculturation.

Freire, in fact, went well beyond leading us toward considering the possibility that a pedagogy of reacculturation could meet our needs. He and others also told us something about what a pedagogy of reacculturation might be, and how it might work. We learned first that reacculturation is at best extremely difficult to accomplish. Furthermore, macho fantasies of reacculturation such as "The Taming of the Shrew" notwithstanding, it is probably next to impossible to reacculturate another person individually. My wife has been trying to turn me into a gentleman for years, with no visible result.

What does seem just possible to accomplish is for people to reacculturate themselves. That is, there does exist a way in which we seem able to sever, diminish, or renegotiate our ties to one or more of the cultural communities we belong to and at the same time gain membership in another such community. We can do all that if, and it seems only if, we work collaboratively. What we have to do, it appears, is create a temporary transition or "support" group that we can join on the way, so to speak, as we undergo the trials of changing allegiance from one cultural community to another. The main agenda of this transition group is to provide an arena for conversation and to sustain us while we learn the language, mores, and values of the cultural community we are trying to join.

In short, this pedagogy of reacculturation had been right under our noses all along. What we had been doing ourselves was exactly that. We ourselves were engaged in the complex, tortuous, aggravating collaborative process of reacculturation. Faced with a situation that seemed alien to us and which our training as carrel rats, conventional academic humanists, did not seem to prepare us to do, in self-defense we had recognized the degree of affinity that existed among us, formed on that basis a transitional group, and assigned ourselves tasks to do collaboratively. We read. We met regularly. We treated ourselves well and had a good time. We got to know each other. We talked.

We learned a lot, of course, from what we read, because whenever we read what we are doing is joining new cultural communities. We join the communities represented by the authors of the texts we read, by acquiring fluency in the language of the text and making it our own. A library from this point of view is not a repository; it's a crowd. Conversely, we make the authors we read members of our own cultural community. Our little discussion group had in effect adopted Sennett and Cobb and Freire into membership in it. But although we learned a lot from what we read, we learned much more from each other's responses to what we read. Each of us began to change, and we discovered that the most powerful force changing us was each other's influence. In the process we became an entirely new cultural community, a community that talked about education as quintessentially reacculturative and talked about education as quintessentially collaborative.

Sooner or later, of course, we all moved out of this community in quite different professional directions. Mina Shaughnessy, as you know, explored ways of helping students deal with the errors they inevitably commit as they begin to make the transition to the new cultural com-

munity of the "literate." Donald McQuade went to work on a new anthology of American literature, a landmark volume that acknowledges deep diversities in American culture. Harvey Wiener set out to organize writing program administrators nationally, so as to offer others the benefits of collaboration that we had received.

I myself went in still another direction. As perhaps you know either through things of mine in print or by having endured one of the collaborative learning demonstrations I have been known to inflict upon unsuspecting college faculties here and there, I began an effort to explore the process and rationale of collaborative learning. In that effort I eventually made two discoveries that I found exceedingly helpful. First, I found that there already existed a relevant technology, the technology of small group work, that college instructors could acquire relatively easily and put to use to organize effective collaborative learning among their students. And second, I found that there exists a language, the language of social construction, in which it is possible to talk more fruitfully about collaborative learning than in the language of cognition. One product of that discovery is my bibliographical essay that some of you may find of interest called "Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge" (Authority). I learned also that as college instructors who apply the technology of small group work to organize effective collaborative learning among our students, we could learn a great deal about ourselves, about the subjects we teach, about our students, and about the enormously diverse and rapidly changing American cultural community of which we are all part.

II. "Classroom Research"

So much for personal history. I would like now to talk a bit about the last two issues I mentioned: what we can learn about our students and what we can learn about American culture. These issues are especially relevant to the possibility of the "classroom research" that I mentioned earlier. By way of demonstrating this point, let me read you some material generously provided to me by a colleague of mine, Professor John Trimbur, now at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. While teaching some years ago at Baltimore Community College, Trimbur asked his students to keep a personal log of their collaborative work together. One of the tasks he gave them to work on collaboratively was a Studs Terkel interview about a former Ku Klux Klan leader who had come to agree with the position of Martin Luther King. After discussing the piece in small, task-oriented groups similar in most respects to the discussion group that my colleagues and I had formed, the students were to go home and write an essay explaining that change, all the while keeping track of their thinking in their log. Trimbur tells the rest of the story this way:

> One woman wrote in her log [he says] that at first she couldn't think of anything to say. She found the assignment difficult because she did not want to "judge" the guy. She went on quite a while in this entry to say how in her family she had been brought up not to "judge" other people.

Notice here that the student herself attributes her behavior to the way she had been acculturated in the first place: the way "she had been brought up." Trimbur continues:

> Then, in a log entry written a few days later, she wrote again about the class hour when we discussed the Terkel piece and the writing assignment. What she remembered now was what another woman in the class had said about "conversion." She found herself "talking it over" with that woman in her mind, and as she talked it over she began to connect the idea of conversion with the story of Saint Paul in the Bible. Making this connection was quite an event for her, as the entry describes it. "Event" is not too strong a word for the experience, because it so clearly involved an active, imagined classmate. And once that event occurred she felt ready to write and interested in what she had to say.

Notice first in this passage that change began for the student with a real discussion with a peer, the person who provided the word, "conversion," that became so important in this student's thinking. The student then internalized this discussion with her peer and continued it in her own imagination. What this suggests is that effective collaboration does not stop when group work stops. Group work provides the language we need, in this case the key word "conversion," in order to "talk to ourselves" productively in a new way.

Second, notice that the discussion, external and internal, did not only change this student's opinion; it also changed her feelings. It made her "ready to write and interested in what she had to say." As a result of her early acculturation into one community (being "brought up not to 'judge' people") she had a tendency to reject the whole idea being presented in the Terkel interview. This attitude changed to a willingness to entertain the idea. In recording that change, the student seems to have recorded the crucial first step that must occur whenever we set out to join a larger, more inclusive community of cultural peers: Willingness to entertain a new idea. We can't leave home it seems, without it.

What I would like to stress here, however, is not what happened to this student but what her instructor did with her account of it. At the time, Trimbur happened to be interested in studying the "inner" process of collaborative learning. We set out to interpret the key passage in this student's log so as to suggest several different ways to explain the student's account: an explanation in rhetorical terms, one in subjectivist terms, and one in social terms. He then opted for the latter, concluding that it was by changing "her stance relative to another person" that the student was able to change "her stance relative to the task." Trimbur's trenchant commentary appears in full, if you'd like to read it, in the introduction to my textbook *A Short Course in Writing.*

What I would most like to emphasize here is that an instructor who had gathered material of this sort but whose interests differed from Trimbur's might interpret it in any one of several entirely different but equally interesting and valuable ways. To someone with literary critical interests

the material might suggest ways to apply verbal or symbolic analysis to "living" texts. Or it might suggest ways in which social relations affect the imagination, leading to an extension of reader-response criticism that could draw on the psychological writings of L. S. Vygotsky and dovetail into currently fashionable studies of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Someone with philosophical interests might be moved to explore relationships between language as a social entity and what are called the processes of cognition, leading perhaps to a consideration of the critique of traditional epistemology offered by Richard Rorty. Someone with an interest in psychology might read the material as suggesting ways in which readers respond to emotional challenge or threat. Someone with a religious bent might find resources for discussing the grass roots potential for future developments in "liberation theology." The sociologically concerned might see a way of exploring the dynamics of social change among people in one or another racial, ethnic, or economic category. And composition specialists might find suggestive material for studying how writers overcome "blocks." And so on.

The material I have offered in this one brief example lends itself, in short, to a large variety of interest, and it provides "data," if you will, for research in many areas where, to date, the surface has barely been scratched. Furthermore, it is important to notice, material of this sort is otherwise unobtainable except through the fertile social conditions that collaborative learning creates. Only in the security provided by peer support in small groups which have been given the focus of well-tailored collaborative tasks are people likely to formulate and make accessible to others the uncertain, nebulous, and protean thinking that occurs in the process of change. Only in the security of small group conversation can students speak freely of themselves, by themselves, and for themselves. Instructors in this setting teach indirectly by means of a conversation-focusing task. They neither "facilitate" nor "sit in," but literally step out. They do not listen directly. But they do hear and hear a great deal more than most instructors ever hear. By providing a secure context for focused conversation, that is, instructors who organize collaborative learning hear their students' collective experience in the reports of group recorders. More productively still, instructors hear their students' individual experience through the writing that their collaborative work emboldens them to provide in logs and papers.

This, finally, is the factor that provides "classroom research" of this sort with the degree of "control" it needs in order to establish its validity. "Control" is established by virtue of the fact that collaborative learning is, of course, contrived. Collaborative learning occurs institutionally within the clearly defined and all but universally understood conditions of the classroom. If the technology of collaborative learning is systematically applied, therefore, it can replicate from situation to situation, from class to class, conditions within which quite different groups of participants arrive at consensus and dissent. These replicable conditions can control and thus validate the results derived from classroom research of the sort I have described.

It is therefore work of this sort that I recommend to you as teachers of the humanities in community colleges. It is research for which the conditions of community college humanities classrooms are eminently suited. They provide both the requisite diverse population and the requisite challenging texts. Furthermore, the potential in research of this type for active, vitalizing collaboration among faculty, similar to the collaboration that my colleagues and I engaged in some years ago, is great. And, finally, research of this type is of the highest professional importance. It reveals us Americans—our students and ourselves—as people who know that human survival depends on developing our skill in negotiating among the diverse communities we belong to. It reveals what it takes for us to learn how to engage effectively in the democratic process, a process that, as any parent of young children knows, is by no means native to anyone. And it thereby reveals us as we—ourselves and our students—undertake the crucial task of becoming integrated productively into the larger cultural community that we call "American life."

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