

Tutors' Column: "A Writing Center in Prison: The Value of Collaborative Learning"

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When you think of prison, what comes to mind? People locked in cages, with no hope for rehabilitation? Illiterate people without potential to learn? It might be rare for one's first impression to be that prison is a place of spiritual growth, transformation, and learning, but that has been the case for me. Whether or not formal education opportunities have been available where I am incarcerated, we have always had a learning community here.

Informal learning in prison is driven by collaborative learning. After reading several articles for my Tutoring Writing class as an incarcerated student training to be a Writing Advisor, I realized that what Andrea Lunsford, Kenneth Bruffee, and John Trimbur refer to is the kind of collaborative learning that has always taken place in this prison environment. Theories of collaborative learning developed by these and other authors, though, consider university settings. Since prison is not considered a place for learning, data that shows what collaborative learning looks like in a prison setting is limited. By identifying the barriers that hinder collaborative learning, finding creative ways to work around those barriers, and gathering data on what works in prisons, tutors and teachers both incarcerated and free can make collaborative learning in prisons more effective.

WHAT COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IS AND IS NOT

This term "collaborative learning" covers a range of techniques. John Trimbur describes it as "practices such as reader response, peer critiques, small writing groups, joint writing projects, and peer tutoring in writing centers and classrooms" (87). Trimbur also points out that collaborative learning consists of shifting responsibility from the teacher to the group (87). Collaborative learning is not about individualism, nor is it meant to be hierarchy-based. Instead, the students assume leadership as they actively participate in their own learning (Trimbur 87). It is important to be mindful that

students should not just be thrown together without any guidance. Otherwise, students could suffer from negative effects (Bruffee 334).

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The variation of collaboration that has been most productive for me is when my peers and I have spontaneous, informal discussions about our writing assignments. Currently, I'm earning a Master's Degree in Christian Ministry and Restorative Arts. It is a four-year program that prepares students in violence prevention, conflict resolution, and ministerial work. Since this path trains us to work with people, working together collaboratively is crucial. In prison, spontaneous discussion is the most common way to collaborate. These gatherings occur as we walk in lines going from one place to another and in places such as the dining room, yard, and commissary waiting room, and in various bullpens within the institution. When students come together in these situations, I act as a Writing Advisor and guide in the conversations that take place. Students often state their concerns about their papers, and I suggest how they might deal with those concerns. Together, we bounce ideas off one another; however, whenever other Writing Advisors are present, then the role of the guide alternates in a conversational way which allows everyone in the group to learn from one another. Bruffee explains it best when he speaks of "normal discourse" as conversation that takes place within a community of knowledgeable peers (329). It is through these conversations with my peers that I compose my papers. Talking helps me with my reflective thinking, broadening my internalized conversations that guide my writing as I "re-externalize" my internalized conversations in the papers that I produce (Bruffee 328).

HOW AND WHEN DOES COLLABORATIVE LEARNING WORK?

Lunsford, in advocating for collaboration in the form of Burkean Parlor Centers, points out that this center is collaboration aligned with diversity, and it goes against the grain of American education (7). One barrier she identifies is dealing with an institution that can be hostile towards collaboration if its stakeholders feel threatened in terms of authority. In prison, however, we deal with a different kind of authority, an authority that has absolute control over what goes on and puts security as its highest priority. There is no way to decentralize the authority of the prison administration; as a result, we are confronted with barriers that include: 1) limited mobility for students; 2) no internet access; 3) limited access to the education building; 4) little communication with peers, tutors, and teachers; 5) no opportunities to work formally in small groups or hold conferences aside from our weekly classes and study hall; 6)

the possibility of lockdowns; and 7) stresses caused by the prison environment. All of these factors limit collaborative learning.

I do want to mention how we can overcome some of these barriers. As conversation plays a major role in successful collaboration, conversation works especially well in prison because when we return to our cells, we reflect on and re-contextualize these conversations in our writing (Bruffee 327-328). One way to address limited mobility is to try to get permission from administration to allow students who reside in the same cell house opportunity for small group sessions on the first floor of the cell house or in the bullpen for an hour a day. Outside of attending programs, prisoners are kept separate in different cell houses, and they are also separated within the cell houses as well as on different galleries, narrow walkways that allow prisoners to walk to and from their cells. The thing about being in the same cell house is that it is easier for officers to let us out of our cells to meet in the bullpen for tutoring with minimal security concern. Another thing we could do is utilize letter writing to offer reader response and peer critiques to fellow peers within the same cell house with the help of inmate porters, workers that do custodial work in the cell house. John Trimbur states, "Peer feedback is no doubt the most common form of collaborative learning used in teaching writing" (98). Through these letters we can offer constructive peer feedback and partake in collaborative learning.

Our writing center here at Stateville is relatively new; it's a satellite center of North Park University's Writing Center. However, one of the major differences is that we do not have a writing lab with computers. We do not have access to our center five days a week where students can drop-in during school hours. For the most part, the writing center at Stateville is facilitated by peer tutors, which decentralizes the authority from the teacher to the students. Maintaining a collaborative learning environment in prison is not something new, but what can be new is to begin gathering information for research purposes about what works in prison in terms of learning collaboratively. Lunsford points out that a collaborative environment calls for monitoring and evaluation of the group process; in doing so, each person involved should build on a theory of collaboration (6). Currently, tutoring conferences take place once a week for almost three hours during study hall. Writing Advisors usually consist of the inmate students and, at times, Writing Advisors who come as guests from North Park's Writing Center (Chicago Campus). The data that we collect is mostly from formal conferences that last up to half an hour depending on how many people need tutoring. However, some of the inmate

Writing Advisors record informal conferences that take place during the week. Most importantly, it would be wise to gather data for future research purposes, especially on the informal collaborative discussions that take place. Monitoring data collected in a prison context would shed light on what areas we can strengthen or eliminate. The data collected in this prison is given to our writing center director Melissa Pavlik so that it can be stored electronically. Writing centers in universities often document nearly everything they do; to create a writing center in a prison context that effectively encourages collaborative learning and peer tutoring, it is necessary to gather data and find ways to share what this data shows both within and beyond our university and prison communities.

CONCLUSION

Universities have a long history with writing centers, whereas the history of writing centers in prisons is a new concept. One thing that connects us, though, is collaborative learning. We may face different challenges with collaborative learning, but our approaches to confront these challenges can be similar. I hope to challenge teachers, students, and advocates outside of prisons to think about innovative ways to develop effective strategies that help make collaborative learning flourish in a prison environment.



WORKS CITED

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