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An Analysis of Oakland University Comp I and Comp II Courses

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Though reading and digesting information is at the heart and core of understanding it, seeing and experiencing that same information is a way to further internalize and learn it. I observed both a Comp I and Comp II course at Oakland University, and I indeed witnessed and synthesized elements of our writing and rhetoric readings that further helped me understand and contextualize those concepts. Collaboration was at the center of each class, and amongst this collaboration, there were different levels of understanding and student interaction that can be most clearly detailed through the group dynamics themselves and also the individual class activities.

 Both class sessions sponsored activities that had the students split into groups to create content and knowledge, but in the Comp II class, the instructor took more of a back seat approach and let the students run the activity themselves, which showcased unique components of student-led discussion and the notion that students come to better conclusions together. The activity was a competition where the class separated into two teams to make up questions for the opposing team to answer, and throughout the game, the students had to agree on which questions to ask, when to ask them, and how to answer the questions asked of them. This highlighted elements of collaboration and group work, and since the instructor didn’t comment on the content of the questions, this lead to the community of students taking charge of their learning.

However, as Bruffee (1984) points out, “organizing collaborative learning effectively requires more than throwing students together with their peers with little to no guidance or preparation,” and while some of the Comp II students truly did work together to create effective responses, some of them did not, thus leading to mixed collaborative results (p. 652). Sometimes, non-effective collaboration leads to the more negative results of group work, such as “conformity, anti-intellectualism, and leveling-down of quality,” and specifically, some of the Comp II students experienced some elements of conformity (Bruffee, 1984, p. 652). In fact, some just adhered to whatever their assigned leader said, even if their ideas weren’t as strong as some of the alternate options. True collaborative learning, however, is achieved when various conditions and motivations are met, such as students talking through and socially justifying each other’s responses (Bruffee, 1984, p. 646). Another group of students achieved this, and in turn, it’s clear that both the positive and negative repercussions of collaborative learning found their way almost naturally into this classroom.

Throughout this collaborative activity, the dynamics and cooperation of the group members were of the utmost prominence. After a few rounds of questions, it was clear that the first team was heavily dependent on one group member, and this leads back to the notion of authority that Bruffee addresses. In regards to collaborative learning, people in positions of authority “invite and encourage” members to join their community and “accept the responsibility for inducting new members” as the learning process is carried out (Bruffee, 1984, p. 650). Though Bruffee is referring to teachers and in this case the authority figure was an individual student, he served the same purpose, and he exemplified many of these same qualities. With his help, the group itself determined what was valuable in the activity, and in the end, this supports both Bruffee and Harris’ stances on collaboration that students themselves will take charge while adhering to their knowledge communities.

The Comp I class, meanwhile, had more instructor facilitation during the group activity, and through this, it was clear how the topic itself can relate to the students and can be more prominent and more applicable than they may even realize. With this class, the instructor reserved the last thirty minutes for the students to separate into three groups and to frame an argument on one of three assigned topics. Each group had the general parameter of what they were going to talk about, and as they narrowed down into their topics and discussed which points to make and when, they were making connections to their lives and bringing it all back down to a few key, common themes.

As the students were working, I focused on two groups that seemed to have different collaborative approaches and that resulted in various events. Group A, which was comprised of students who were less willing to participate, had more difficulty adhering to the assignment than group B, which had more engaged students who primarily talked and then wrote down what they said. This strikes me as interesting and important because as Janet Emig (1977) states, “for some of us, talking is a valuable, even necessary, form of pre-writing,” and though this “is not to say that writing is talk recorded,” it hints at how speaking out thoughts aloud can aid our writing process (p. 123). It was evident that one group utilized the power of collaborative talk while one did not, and as Group B engaged in discussion and proposed new ideas, it came back to Harris’ notion of students being socialized into their discipline. Harris (1989) states that students are “simply unused to the peculiar demands on academic discourse,” and by talking it over together before eventually writing it down, they’re both “pre-writing” their drafts while also figuring it out as they go (p. 16). In the end, the group that spoke together and tried to understand together made their point clearer and better aligned to the assignment than the group who primarily worked individually, and this showcases a connection between speaking and writing within a certain community.

James Berlin (1988), whose article deals with rhetoric and ideology and how it relates to writing courses, promotes the notion that “ideology is transmitted through language practices,” and this can reinforce the notion that speaking aloud can aid one’s writing (p. 478). Berlin elaborates on how rhetoric and ideology go hand-in-hand, and he also admits that these ideologies change over time and that the writing classroom should be like a hermeneutic circle that is social and cultural and that creates knowledge (Berlin, 1988). I saw elements of this in the Comp I class, and I saw how the students related to each other and directly used and analyzed rhetoric, whether they realized it or not. One of the topics was the rising costs of tuition, and as the students conferred with each other and agreed on a stance, they sifted through what they knew and where they personally stood in relation to this concept, thus developing their own position. They wouldn’t have achieved this if they hadn’t shared their thoughts and collaborated on their views and approaches, and together, the power of ideology and talking proved to be very prominent in the Comp I setting.

Ultimately, collaboration dominated the mode of learning in the two classrooms, and within those realms of collaboration, the groups and the activities themselves highlighted their overall take from the sessions. The Comp II class hedged forward independently within the comforts of their community while the Comp I class made steady progress with their relevant, socio-epistemic topics. Both utilized collaboration and other methods of rhetoric, and in the end, both adopted a mantra of modeling the writing classroom around the students. I had thought that the practices of Berlin and Harris were theoretical and perhaps not totally applicable to the college classroom, but after seeing the extensive effects of collaboration for myself, I saw that indeed students learn best with each other and amongst their own peers. In sum, I’ve learned how collaboration can be the core of a college classroom and its activities, and within the realms of my observations, this ultimately can affect how students learn and approach their writing.

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