



## **DISCURSIVE BRIDGES: COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN A WORKSHOP SPACE**

*Amber Carini, Sarah Haufrect, Bina Patel,  
Andrea Ruiz, and Nithan Sannappa  
University of California, Berkeley*

As workshop leaders at UC Berkeley's Student Learning Center, we lead two 1-hour small group workshops a week through the entire semester. The students in the workshops, typically freshmen and sophomores, sign up to take them as adjunct courses to supplement the larger lecture type setting for which they receive one unit of academic credit, but no letter grade. Noticing that undergraduates speak to professors in a very different way than they speak to their peers, we were struck with the uniqueness of discourse that occurs in these small workshops. We began to become aware of how we participated in this unique discourse. This discourse of our workshops, which is not limited to simply the way we speak but also encompasses our use of body language and even silence, combines the rigidity of academic language with a more colloquial everyday feel. It is not an easy job for a workshop leader to set a tone of collaboration while having to lead students, since the workshop leader is both a peer and a teacher, and the workshop is a hybrid space in which the more academic classroom discussion and the casual peer discussion converge. The workshop walks a fine line between isolating its participants by perpetuating

academic discourse and reinstating a hierarchical space and remaining in colloquial discourse that would keep its participants from accessing academic discourse. The way that the workshop leader approaches the workshop space through their use of language, both spoken and physical, sets the tone for the collaborative bridging of the discursive gap between academic discourse and colloquial parlance.

This article looks at how workshop leaders' discourse choices create a workshop space that exists in between the context of peer discussion and the classroom by combining the hierarchical and dialogic modes of collaborative learning identified by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford. We will first demonstrate how the vocabulary imported from the peer relationship developed during individual meetings between workshop leaders and students, makes the workshop more accessible as a discursive space and thus facilitates collaborative learning. We will further demonstrate that the language a peer workshop leader uses can bridge the gap between academic discourse and colloquial language used in peer discussion. The language negotiated by the workshop leader in this collaborative space allows the workshop to act as a bridge for undergraduates, introducing them to the language of the university and thus enabling them to produce knowledge.

To explore the language bridged in the space of the workshop, we turned to Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's "Singular Texts, Plural Authors," which shows two major modes in which collaborative learning can exist—"dialogically" and "hierarchically" (403). A combination of these types of dynamics in activities and in the workshop as a whole is a good goal for a workshop leader who wants to acclimate students to the normal discourse of the university. The hierarchical approach involves an authority exterior to the group (like a professor assigning a group project) setting the tasks and/or the approach to the tasks that the group will work on (for

instance determining who will work on what). This mode helps keep the goals clear while providing an outside sounding board for the progress of the group. The use of the hierarchical mode alone, however, risks echoing the classroom dynamic by making the workshop participants feel as though they remain outside of the normal discourse of the university: they are still a group of students who still have to answer to the authority of the leader. The dialogic mode has very fluid structuring, where the group members shift to occupy different roles over the course of the project, and all members of the group partake in defining the goals and how to complete the project. The dialogic mode on its own however, risks a slower progress due to issues such as a conflict or the tendency to stray from the goals with endless dialogue.

### **One-on-One Meetings as Supplement to Class and Workshop**

One of the benefits of participating in a writing workshop is that students receive more personal attention outside the classroom. Workshop students can get individual attention outside the hierarchical dynamic of “instructor: student”, by meeting with the workshop leader individually. Additionally, the Writing Program at the Student Learning Center at UC Berkeley strongly encourages leaders to meet with students in the workshop individually once a week. This individual time enables students to discuss their own projects and work on individually set goals with the tutor<sup>1</sup>, yet as this is part of a collaborative learning/writing, its essential that the hierarchal relationship of “instructor: student” remains outside of this space. For this reason, as tutors we must be careful with the language we use during individual sessions. Most importantly, the dialogical nature of these individual meetings helps to foster a dialogical environment in the workshops.

Discursive practices by both the tutor and the tutees surrounding “individual time” can not only balance and set the tone for the

roles they will take in workshop, but they also inform the kind of language used in the workshop by establishing the way that the tutor relates to the tutees. In the space of the workshop, tutor and tutee's interactive language reveals how they perceive each other and how those perceptions shape their expectations.

Our experiences with "individual time" were surprisingly similar despite the fact that our workshop contexts were radically different. One of the workshops was for a large elementary argumentation lecture class, while the rest were for smaller composition classes, and out of our five workshops, two were not taken for academic credit. Yet the reason that these experiences may have been similar was that we all participated in a seminar for workshop leaders where we became aware of the language we used when talking about our workshops and how our language affected the tone of the workshop, either facilitating or interfering with collaborative learning of the space.

The objective of the individual meeting is to demystify the workshop for both the student and leader and to create the feeling that the workshop is a casual tutoring environment where we can collaborate as peers. In the collaborative learning/writing environment of the workshop, the option of having a more hierarchical approach seems to be the most comfortable - or at least that we are most accustomed to in a university setting. As the leaders of the workshop, we tended to refer to it as "my workshop"; it was easier to refer to what we do as "teaching," and the people participating in the workshop quickly became "my students" and sometimes even, "my kids" if we were not careful. For students in the workshop who come from the structured environment of the classroom, the fastest way to establish themselves as a group was to consider the workshop leader as a teacher and the workshop as another "class" and/or a "discussion section" that functioned as an extension of the larger class. Yet the more we began to "meet" individu-

ally with our students, and the more our Workshop Leader Seminar discussed the terminology we used around workshop, the harder it became to stick with these terms, and the harder it became for our workshops to operate on a hierarchical mode where the language relegated the workshop participants to defined roles.

Instead of “office hours,” a term frequently used by professors and graduate student instructors, we would have individual “meetings” with the students in our workshops during the week. We would sit next to our students instead of opposite them, and the individual time was not structured in any specific way but on the contrary was a lot like “hanging out.” We would usually meet students for individual sessions near the front desk of the Student Learning Center and begin conversations as we moved to a table in the atrium. Once in the atrium, we eased into discussing the class and or assignments, but we would always go back and forth between writing and what was going on in our lives as students. Students scheduled for the next meeting almost always came to find us and sit in, thus leading to more conversations about the class, which helped create a casual space where we were all students. After the first couple of meetings, it became easier for the people in our workshops to address us by our first names instead of a more formal title, opening up more of a dialogue where we became more of a sounding board and a peer rather than a person there to teach them something. Even if we only met with students in our workshops about every couple of weeks to discuss, say, an upcoming assignment or a current paper, the individual meetings did not take on an “office hours” tone. “Meeting” and “appointment” were the words of choice for individual time, making it productive while also fairly casual and personal.

This dialogical component to the workshop context transfers to the workshop itself and helps check any desire to lean towards a purely hierarchical mode, as the people participating in workshop

begin to address one another as peers in a formal academic discussion and begin to feel comfortable mixing academic discourse with the colloquial discourse of an open peer discussion. While the students often saw the workshop leader in a hierarchically superior position, the individual meeting served to emphasize their peer relationship. As workshop leaders, we tried to make meetings conversational and casual, where we could use colloquial language to help students understand and negotiate their academic concerns.

### **Collaborative Learning in the Workshop**

The UC Berkeley Student Learning Center website states that the student led writing workshop “operates on the theory that students learn well from one another, and therefore workshop leaders and students work *collaboratively* to determine how to spend workshop time most productively” (italics ours). This theory alludes to Kenneth Bruffee’s manifesto, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” which stresses the value of peers learning from one another in tutoring, workshop, and classroom settings. “What distinguished collaborative learning,” Bruffee writes, “was that it did not seem to change what people learned . . . so much as it changed the social context in which they learned it” (396).

However, modern educational institutions, with their large student populations and restricted budgets, are often unable to provide the settings appropriate to collaborative learning. Most commonly, this dialogic environment is fostered, if at all, in upper division classes and seminars. However, this collegial atmosphere would be beneficial during the first two years of undergraduate coursework, when students are the most apprehensive and confused about their objectives in college. While graduate student-led discussion sections and instructor office hours attempt to foster the intimacy lost in stadium seating lecture halls, students still find themselves

intimidated and hesitant to engage in classes of twenty or thirty students where the instructor or graduate student's superior status is implied by the conventional seating arrangement and/or the unfamiliar language the instructor or graduate student instructor (GSI) uses so naturally because he had been fully acclimated to and totally enmeshed in the university's discourse. The privacy of facing the instructor or GSI one on one becomes even more intimidating. UC Berkeley has begun to offer seminars exclusively for freshman and sophomores, but these courses are limited due to concerns that boil down to issues of time and energy: the extra time a professor must devote to instruct only small amount of students and the funding (both for course materials and/or increased salary for the professor) required that benefits such a small part of the overall student body.

Workshops, facilitated by peer tutors, can often help alleviate this problem, and have the added benefit that they are lead by an undergraduate student - a peer. An intimate space where students hold one another accountable, as equal contributors, for the quality of their discussions promotes students' dialogical engagement with the material. As such, students can learn skills to integrate themselves into the discourse of the university. It also helps students understand that their success depends on active participation in this dialogue to further their skills as they pursue their own scholarly interests.

In the context of student led workshops, which are by their very nature collaborative learning situations, the crucial "social context" Bruffee speaks of is largely shaped by the workshop leader, though the workshop students decide what they need to accomplish in terms of content. While it seems counteractive to de-center traditional educative environments (professor led lecture, for example) by providing a collaborative learning space and then choosing a leader or someone "on top" in the writing workshop, it is necessary

for someone to consciously set a tone in which a new community can be formed in order to promote learning and help students adapt to the university, an environment where “normal discourse” takes place. Achieving the university’s normal discourse, or the language spoken and written “in the established contexts of knowledge in a field,” is a direct goal of the writing workshop (Bruffee 402). With this goal in mind, workshop leaders set a tone through language: spoken language and diction, body language, and even silence. We believe our conscientious decision-making in terms of language greatly affected the mood of our workshop spaces, making more hierarchical or dialogic situations as appropriate to the context.

The diction the workshop leader chooses seems inconsequential, but it actually helps create the tone of the workshop space to a large degree. Referential language, for example, or how people in the workshop address and refer to one another, can either promote power hierarchies or break them down. Some workshop leaders whose students called them their “teacher” or “TA” tended to have students who regarded the workshop more formally, while workshop leaders who were called “workshop leader” or simply their first name tended to be regarded more as a knowledgeable peer and had a more relaxed space.

Students and leaders commonly speak much more casually than in traditional classrooms and even individual meetings. Colloquial language and slang often dominated many discussions as students put abstract and formal themes into their own words for an audience that would support that level of language. Consequently, students could grasp concepts before picking up the pen and writing. Cursing even popped up here and there and was hardly noticed in the context of the discussion. Students and leaders were clearly at ease with one another, paving the way for the normal discourse of the university to eventually take place. The discourse that occurs in this space serves as a transition, a safe place to test out ideas and to



formulate them in the normal university discourse, a place where they are encouraged to practice their new acquisitions without fear of potential embarrassment.

We discovered that the physical elements also inform discursive practices. Spatial arrangements, body language, and the tools used in conveying material can directly affect the types of communication possible between student and instructor. As such, it is important to consider these physical components of an intellectual environment to produce a teaching method that is dialogically engaging and sufficiently versatile to meet the needs of the individual student as well as the class as a whole.

The number of students in a class largely determines its spatial arrangement. Larger classes will most likely take place in lecture halls with stadium seating, with rows of students' desks facing an instructor's podium. Students are often wary of asking questions in this environment, not only due to the anxiety of speaking up before a large crowd, but also because of the inability to engage in meaningful conversation with an instructor or even their fellow students due to the rigidity of the environment to which they have been confined. The lecture hall's spatial arrangement predetermines the positions of the students and the instructor and thus orchestrates the class to a didactic or hierarchical form of instruction in which students are merely receptacles for fixed "knowledge" transmitted by way of the instructor. Rather than engaging with ideas, students are implicitly taught to gauge "what material will be tested," as the effort towards pedantic memorization of facts undermines the goals of understanding and interrelating these facts within a broader educational context.

Smaller classrooms are seemingly more apt for the idea-bartering that is essential to a liberal arts education, but even a smaller class seating arrangement places a significant role. Vibrant discussions are easily eluded when seats are arranged in a discrete grid

that does not allow students to face one another or use positive eye contact and body language. These physical cues from an instructor and/or peers can reinforce a student's self-confidence, creating a lively environment in which students are invited to take risks in order to share their ideas. Such a "market-place" environment seems to be best facilitated by a circle, in which the instructor is no longer the fountainhead of knowledge but rather a facilitator and perhaps even an equal participant in the discovery of knowledge. In turn, the instructor often becomes less intimidating to the individual student who may have been uncomfortable approaching him in a larger setting in which the professor was towering above the student from the stage in an auditorium and literally "looking down on" her.

Both spatial arrangements and body language are also much more relaxed in the workshop, thus promoting it as more personalized space that is not quite classroom, not quite casual "rap session." Some workshop leaders reported that sitting in a circle tended to dissipate the feeling of hierarchy in the workshop space. Interestingly, however, workshop leaders also stated that students in every workshop tended to designate a front of the room, being wherever the workshop leader would sit. This perhaps implies that a student looks for leadership or hierarchical organization by habit or nature. Also, students tended to sit in the same place every workshop. By a workshop leader's sitting in the same place always and having seating more like a traditional classroom, he or she can set a more serious, traditional school dynamic; by his or her moving to different places around the table and trying to form a circular seating situation, he or she can help create a feeling of commonality more unique to a workshop.

While students slipped into old traditional classroom arrangements easily, they clearly felt more relaxed in workshops, based on their body language. Students often put their feet up, rested on their

desks, and leaned their chairs back, especially as the semester wore on. They ceased to raise their hands and simply spoke up instead. They clearly felt more comfortable in the workshop space than in the traditional classroom, which helped promote discussion. Being too casual was only a problem in a few cases when students dozed off or waved to friends through the window, causing distraction to others in the workshop and undermining leaders' measured authority. When this occurred, authority had to be reestablished in order to restore the delicate balance of the workshop space.

A mobile workshop space, meaning one in which students could get up and move around, also proved to foster collaborative learning. Students' writing on the chalkboard gave everyone a chance to be the leader, turning all eyes on the person with the chalk instead of the actual workshop leader. Also, activities in which students walked around the room or paired off in groups de-centered the classroom, shifting the focus away from the workshop leader. This non-traditional physical activity fostered intellectual activity. Moving around the room helped students appropriate the space as their own, giving them more of a voice and agency as they appropriated normal university discourse.

Ironically, what always put the workshop leader back in the center during workshop discussions and activities was not language at all, but silence. It seemed that whenever a hush fell on any of the groups, all eyes were back on the workshop leader, looking for guidance. Workshop leaders reported that while their students did well in the collaborative settings they created, a silence would often turn a peer-based classroom into a hierarchical one again. The delicate balance of the workshop space shows the importance of having a workshop leader or a knowledgeable peer create a space for collaborative learning while facilitating when needed.

## **Bridging Discourses: The Role of the Workshop Leaders**

By creating a generally dialogic space, workshop leaders were able to help students bridge academic and colloquial discourses. By consciously appropriating and shifting styles of language, we can help create a space that is both academic and colloquial and where a common group language that allows access to the daunting shared language of the academy emerges. The space of the workshop takes on the unique role of bridging the student to the exclusive “academese” to which undergraduates are rarely privileged but to which undergraduates must slowly become acclimated over time. The workshop expedites that acclimation process. According to Robin Lakoff, in “The Grooves of Academe,” undergraduates at large universities are excluded from the acquisition of academic language: “The undergraduate who wants continuous personal attention should consider the liberal arts college,” she says (Lakoff 152). Lakoff argues that the mission of a research university is to generate knowledge, and while graduate students are a part of this mission (in that they are learning to create and dispense this knowledge), undergraduates are simply “consumers of the product, not directly involved with its creation and therefore irrelevant to the true concerns of the institution.” “Hence,” she continues,

It makes sense to herd them into large classes, as opposed to the smaller classes and seminars of the graduate level; to restrict their access to professors, who ought not to be distracted from their real work. Likewise, the faculty takes pains to socialize the graduate students into the profession: detailed critiques of their writings, lengthy oral examinations, close contact; but they typically have no such contacts with the Undergraduates. (152)

Lakoff does admit that this is a “heartless” system, and she has no hopes for improving such a system beyond “surface cosmetic repairs” (152).

This is where the workshop provides hope. The workshop essentially allows juniors and seniors, who have already struggled through the “cheerless and frightening” place that the research university often becomes, to impart their understanding of academic discourse to the less experienced freshmen and sophomores (Lakoff 152). While the workshop leaders are more experienced, they are not instructors or professors; one of their main sources of power derives simply from their undergraduate status. Not completely enmeshed in the incomprehensibility of academese (which Lakoff argues is intrinsically difficult to understand as a result of the culture of the creation of knowledge), undergraduates are in a position of bridging the two discursive categories: the colloquial and the academic.

This bridging, however, does not occur automatically. The workshop leader has to deliberately set the tone of the space such that it is neither too formal nor too informal, making a space that bridges the formal academic world and the colloquial ‘regular’ world. It is essential that a workshop leader deliberately engage in discourse that appropriately bridges these two elements in order to avoid either alienating the students with formal academic language or not helping them adapt to this language at all by being too informal. We should strive to use language that fosters learning how to learn, that is, that encourages students to take an active role in their own education.

In order to accomplish this goal of acclimating the students to the discourse of the university, we start by using slightly more rigid physical and spoken language (thereby creating a hierarchical space) and over time letting this discipline fall (leaning toward dialogic space) in order to forge a collaborative environment. In this new environment, the students, with the aid of the leader, begin to decide together on the type of activities or discussions, set the expectations, the working environment - collaboratively establishing the general culture of the workshop space.

It is the aim for the workshop to give students the skills to approach academic language. We do this by combining colloquial and academic language, providing students with a sense of control over their own academic interests, and maintaining a collaborative space (combining hierarchical and dialogical approaches) where we all decide together where to go next. By providing these two components, we saw that we could create a space where students learn the skills they need to become producers of the knowledge that Lakoff argues they simply cannot be. For example, a student in an African American studies workshop, initially a passive observer and consumer of whatever the workshop leader said, emerged from workshop very interested in a subject of her own choosing, the Black Panther movement. She elected to create a research project on an important leader in the movement, Asata Shakur, which utilized academic terms that were previously unfamiliar to her to describe the history, and critically analyze Shakur's rhetoric and writing. The workshop leader recalls the satisfaction of watching this student's transition from a "passive consumer" to a "producer" of knowledge.

In stating that undergraduates *can* produce knowledge, we are responding to Lakoff's "The Grooves of Academe," where she argues that the language of the university is incomprehensible because academics are in the business of creating knowledge, that this knowledge is essentially their commodity. While we are not contending with her assertion that knowledge is the output of the university and that academic language exists to restrict access to this commodity, we are concerned with her placement of undergraduates within the university system. She states that undergraduates are simply passive consumers of academic knowledge. While we agree that this might be the case for many undergrads, we argue that through its various bridging capabilities, the workshop provides a backdrop for the understanding of academia, which could

potentially lead to the creation of undergraduate knowledge. By bridging academic and colloquial discourse, the workshop provides access to the methods and workings of academic knowledge production, and by bridging dialogical and hierarchical collaborative approaches, the workshop provides a space where undergraduates can take control over their academic interests. Combining these two outcomes, we see that the workshop provides a support for undergraduates, who no longer simply stand idly by and consume academic knowledge created by others, but are in a position to create their own.

We saw that students in the workshop environment learn that they can navigate through an often times incomprehensible system and that they can take charge of their own academic interests. In leading students toward such an aim, the workshop leader also gains skills and knowledge, both of the content of their workshop, as well as their methods for approaching the content pedagogically. In a sense then, the workshop, by asking undergraduates to lead each other, encourages the formation of separate “knowledges” for both its leader as well as its attendees.

## Notes

1. Sometimes, the student would like to change the pace of workshop assignments; other times, students may determine their own goals in addition to the goals of the workshop.

## Works Cited

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- Ede, Lisa S., and Andrea Lunsford. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.
- Lakoff, Robin. *Talking Power: the Politics of Language in our Lives*. New York: Basic Books, 1990.
- [AR1] This is just a thought, and I just wrote it to see if it worked

