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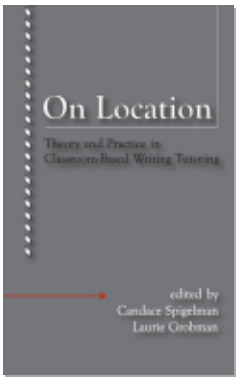

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RECONSTRUCTING AUTHORITY

Negotiating Power in Democratic Learning Sites

Candace Spigelman

I am greatly attracted to peer relationships in the teaching of writing: I used writing groups in my composition classes before they were popular, I directed a learning center where knowledgeable peers offered various kinds of writing assistance, and several years ago I introduced classroom mentors into my basic writing classes. One reason that I emphasize peership activities has to do with my own discomfort with too much classroom authority. Yet I appear to be in good company, for as Susan M. Hubbuch points out, academics in general and writing instructors in particular tend to feel guilty about assuming power, which to all of us "smells of coercion" (1989–90, 35). Rather, we want to empower our students, often by way of collaborative, community-fostering activities. Furthermore, our knowledge of the history of rhetoric as social action and the cultural critical turn in composition have encouraged writing teachers to model more democratic activities in hopes of training students for participatory democracy. We want to resist authoritarian classroom arrangements because we want students to be active in their education and in their lives. We see that peer relationships are, in Kenneth Bruffee's words, a "powerful educative force" (1984, 638), a force recognized by John Dewey in the general education of children and espoused by compositionists representing a range of pedagogical and political perspectives, including Bruffee, Peter Elbow (1973; 1980), Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy (1992), Andrea Lunsford and Lise Ede (1990), John Trimbur (1989, 1998), and Greg Myers (1986).

But what is actually demanded of us or expected of our students when we attempt to decenter the university classroom? Can we truly shed the mantle of authority? According to Hubbuch, instructional authority is necessary for students' academic achievement: students depend on understanding particular teachers' expectations in order to fulfill their roles as learners. When we frustrate or constrain students' dependency role by asking them to share our authority, we tip both the cognitive

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and the psychological scales, which, ironically, may "render the student incapable of learning . . . [and] render the student powerless" (1989/–90, 40). In a similar vein, Russel K. Durst (1999) addresses the pragmatic needs and expectations of many students attending college today and examines the conflicts that ensue because composition's cultural studies focus often appears at odds with these expectations. In Durst's view, most students want their teachers to assume central authority in the classroom. Furthermore, Lad Tobin (1993) argues that our decentering efforts and methods may exacerbate, rather than resolve, power imbalances by driving them underground. In democratic classroom settings, competition for grades and instructor approval remain unacknowledged forces, which ultimately sustain teacher power. Andrea Lunsford (2000) observes that students usually expect instructors to enact exclusionary, individualistic, judgmental forms of control, and may actively resist less oppressive instructional methods. Recognizing the historical, social, and cultural forces that support traditional views of classroom relationships, Lunsford states: "We shouldn't fool ourselves that creating new models of authority, new spaces for students and teachers to experience nonhierarchical, shared authority, is a goal we can hope to reach in any sort of straightforward way" (71). Indeed, college writing teachers often find that even more circuitous efforts to refigure authority are confounded.

In this chapter, I want to add another layer to the already complicated problem of power relations in democratic classrooms. I will describe my efforts to develop a "new model of authority, a new space," using classroom-based writing tutors as peer group leaders. In the discussion that follows, I will draw upon learning center theory to account for the student mentors' positionings within their groups, their group members' constructions of their authority, and their conflicted status in the seminar class they took with me. I will show that in these democratic classroom settings, power was repeatedly resisted, negotiated, and recentered among students in both groups and between the tutors and me. I will argue that, like traditional models, our newer practices are subject to institutional figurations that continue to concentrate power in teachers and limit students' authority at every level and instructional site. Thus, together with their students, writing teachers must continue to critique and interrogate each new effort to achieve shared authority even as they create more circuitous paths.

PEER GROUP LEADERS AND BASIC WRITERS

With support from Penn State University's Center on Excellence in Learning and Teaching, I created a set of linked courses, intended to promote peer collaboration in a basic writing class while introducing prospective primary and secondary teachers to writing theory and practice. I had always used peer writing groups, and I believed they served an important function for developing writers, as they did for published writers in various arenas. But even though I carefully orchestrated my classroom writing groups, I recognized the limits of peer group activity: oftentimes, inexperience with group work, insecurity about their own writing skills, or social concerns constrain basic writers' active participation (for analyses of peer writing group problems, see, among others, Spear 1988; Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans 1994b; Roskelly 1999; Berkenkotter 1984; Leverenz 1994; Goodburn and Ina 1994; Spigelman 2000). My first peer group leaders seminar placed five specially selected sophomore education majors in a section of basic writing that I was teaching. During class time each Friday, these classroom-based writing tutors joined the same group of three to four developmental writers to discuss their essay drafts and also to discuss topics or readings relevant to their writing. In addition, they met with me weekly for a seventy-five-minute seminar, in which they learned to facilitate workshops and to conduct group-tutoring sessions. In the seminar, they also assessed their weekly writing group's progress, problem solved, and planned strategies for upcoming group meetings.[1] By introducing peer mentors into my basic writing class, I hoped that my developmental writers would benefit from a more student-centered classroom environment, where textual authority was vested in the student writers and their readers, rather than in me as the writing instructor.

One of the great ironies of democratic classrooms, however, is that few are genuinely student governed. In my basic writing class, writing group participation was a requirement of the course; likewise, I determined the composition of the groups based on my assessment of students' writing abilities.[2] Anne Ruggles Gere points out the decisive difference between autonomous self-sponsored groups that meet outside of schools and those arranged by classroom instructors: members of self-sponsored writing groups have personal motivation for sharing their writing with others; moreover, the writing group exchange is a dialectical process predicated on mutual respect and individual autonomy (1987, 50). In contrast,

classroom writing groups may achieve semiautonomy at best, but "the institutional origins of authority prevent them from becoming completely autonomous" (4). In my class, I orchestrated group work, included peer group leaders, constructed discussion topics, and ultimately graded students' performance.

Despite these inconsistencies, I believed that the students in my basic writing class would respond actively and enthusiastically to their group leaders as knowledgeable peers. Developments in classroom-based tutoring helped me to theorize the project, for peer group leaders seem to combine the merits of writing center tutoring and peer group work: in writing centers, peer tutoring is understood to hold advantages for both tutee and tutor; in college classrooms, writing group theory emphasizes active learning and the collaborative construction of knowledge. Although classroom-based tutors are a more recent adaptation, as early as 1984, Kenneth Bruffee united peer response groups and peer tutoring as two subsets of "collaborative learning." In both "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" (1984) and "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" (1998), Bruffee argued for the value of student-centered, cooperative writing activities, stressing that when students collaboratively problem solve about issues relating to writing, they actively contribute to their own learning and to the learning of fellow students.

I also took direction from existing models of classroom-based writing tutoring. At CUNY, for example, writing center tutors attached to first-year writing courses fulfilled a variety of functions, from reading ungraded papers to participating in classroom activities, including occasional peer group meetings (Soliday 1995). At Ohio State, students taking an upper-level course in writing theory and practice were paired with basic writing peer groups, meeting weekly outside of regular class times (for an expanded discussion of this program, see chapter 8 in the present volume by Melissa Nicolas). In my colleague Laurie Grobman's classes, one or two advanced writing students served as roaming peer group assistants during regular class meetings. They contributed to invention and revising activities and to discussions of assigned readings and also functioned as facilitators for weekly online response workshops. As Grobman explains in chapter 3, her project challenged Muriel Harris's distinction between the tutor's primarily global response, focused on helping students to become better writers, and the peer group's more immediate attention to the specific draft at hand. Grobman asserts that the goal of the tutor and of the peer group members is ultimately the

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same: to improve each participant's writing abilities and understanding of writing principles.

In both my peer group leaders seminar and my basic writing classes, I tried to foster collaboration, shared knowledge, shared textual ownership, and nonhierarchical leadership by modeling these attitudes and behaviors in my own give-and-take with students in both settings. But I found my efforts repeatedly foiled by the expectations of the students themselves. On every level, when I tried to dismantle authority, students reconstructed it, and in similar fashion, the peer group leaders, Allison, Kathy, Anne, Tim, and Casey,[3] found themselves faced with conflicting role definitions in the peer groups and in the seminar.

PEER GROUP LEADERS ASSUME AUTHORITY

Because their seminar classes stressed democratic approaches to group mentoring, encouraging student collegiality and emphasizing the social features of invention and other meaning-making activities, the peer group leaders had every expectation of integrating themselves into their groups. However, as they began meeting regularly with their group members, the tutors seemed unable to evade their sense of responsibility for their group's organization and processes. In order to promote peer response and to encourage the basic writers to revise based on their peers' suggestions, for example, they found themselves wanting to create specific policies, and they started to modify the group response procedures we had established together in order to fit the needs of their own groups. Anne instructed her students to offer one positive and one negative comment about the draft before engaging in deeper discussion of the content; Kathy designed a check sheet with four questions about the form and content of each essay; both Allison and Casey asked each writer to briefly summarize his or her essay or to state its central point before reading aloud to the group; and Tim told his group members to put their responses in writing before discussing them. Notably, their basic writing students willingly complied.

Why was this the case? Why did the peer group leaders feel compelled to assume responsibility for the structure and progress of their groups, even though I explicitly encouraged a different model of engagement? Investigating the politics inherent in curriculum-based tutoring programs, Harvey Kail and John Trimbur (1987) argue that assigning tutors to classrooms perpetuates a hierarchical transmission-reception model of learning, since the tutor first and foremost represents the instructor and

the institution. Unlike tutors in writing centers, who experience with their tutees the social processes of colearning and knowledge making and who are able to detach themselves from the influence and authority of teachers, curriculum-based tutors (which would include peer group leaders) and their students remain tied to institutional power and approval for their learning. The difference, as Kail and Trimbur see it, is that in the learning center setting students are more able to reflect on their "shared status as undergraduates" and to confront—and ultimately to resist—the ways they have been shaped by institutional structures of authority in favor of their own active learning. In contrast, they say, curriculum-based models encourage the dissemination of teacher-generated knowledge, and, as a result, tutors and tutees alike fail to confront the necessary "crises of authority" that will enable them to recognize themselves as cocreators of knowledge (11–12). Building on Kail and Trimbur's theory, Dave Healy argues that writing center tutors are less likely to experience conflicts of allegiance, since their work is predicated on physical and theoretical semiautonomy from classroom power bases and evaluative structures. In contrast, "heightened role conflict " is a significant outcome of curriculum-based tutoring, since curriculum-based tutors must struggle with allegiance to their instructor, "with a responsibility to espouse his/her party line," or to the principles and practices of peer collaboration derived from their training in writing centers (1993, 23).[4]

In Nancy Maloney Grimm's (1999) view, authority inheres hegemonically in the tutoring role. Invoking Louis Althusser's metaphor, Grimm argues that in writing centers, tutors are "hailed" as institutional representatives of white, middle-class cultural values. Internalizing and projecting these norms, tutors sustain the regulatory role of educational discourse in the United States by representing a single, privileged set of literacy practices. When tutors assume that tutees will benefit by imitating the discourse of the dominant culture, they enact instructional roles that bespeak their affiliation with the institution, rather than its diverse array of students and discourses, and their motivations, no matter how lofty, reproduce their tutees as deficient and Other.

Although these theorists are concerned with one-to-one tutoring situations, their critiques are also relevant to peer group leadership in classrooms, underscoring as they do the ubiquity of institutional power arrangements and their alliance with literacy practices at every level. Following their lines of thinking, we could agree that the peer group leaders' seminar and their status as outsiders in the basic writing class

"remove[d the] tutors from the student community by installing them a power station or two above their peers, a step away from student culture, a step closer to the faculty" (Kail and Trimbur 1987, 8). Certainly, the classroom-based tutors took an active leadership role in the peer groups, circumscribing the group's process of text exchange and response. They did so in part because the groups seemed to them too amorphous or nonproductive or out of control, and they did indeed feel empowered, by virtue of their view of their role and the expectations of the writing group members. But their authority was more complicated than first meets the eye, since, ultimately, the success of their leadership hinged on their peer relationships within their groups.

PEER GROUP LEADERS DEFLECT AUTHORITY

Early on, the peer group leaders discovered that if the groups were to function collaboratively, mentors would need to attempt to deflect authority, to guard against being cast in the instructional role noted in Healy's (1993) and Kail and Trimbur's (1987) critique, as opposed to the role of "knowledgeable peer." When group members viewed their leader as "the teacher," they became passive or resistant, they required more and more prompting to respond to each other's essays, and they quickly learned to take advice from the tutor alone instead of seeking feedback from other group members. In contrast, the groups that revealed the greatest collaboration and enthusiasm for writing were those that sustained more nonauthoritarian, nonhierarchical peer arrangements in the face of pressures to establish tutor-led sessions.

For example, although Casey had instituted procedural changes for reading drafts, she found that she could decenter power by fostering a sense of shared responsibility among members. In her journal, she wrote, "My peer group members wanted to transfer all the authority to me. In order to stay away from this role and give responsibility back to the students . . . , I simply accepted every member's initial suggestions and then pushed them to clarify and develop their ideas and suggestions in the workshop." She also asked group members to write comments for each draft, noting that as written responses, "individual feedback was valued because everyone had something to say, and each member's opinion seemed to be valued more because it was personal, not just an extension of someone else's idea" (see chapter 5 in this volume).

Some of the peer group leaders worked to build a feeling of camaraderie and friendship between themselves and their group members. Allison,

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whose group seemed always engaged and whose members showed noticeable growth in their writing skill, described her experiences this way: "With my peer group, I began by trying to seem like someone they didn't have to be afraid of. I made myself a peer instead of a teacher figure." Indeed, Allison was a peer: she lived in the same residence hall as two of her group members; she was sometimes moody or tired; but she was also extremely interested in her peer group's writing, meeting on her own time with students who needed help and always offering words of encouragement.

Kathy too cast herself in the role of friend and peer as she worked to build a relationship with and among the group members. She allowed conversations to stray "off task"; she encouraged joking, including playful comments about each other's writing; and she openly discussed her difficulties in passing her anatomy course. At one point, when she wanted to try a new response technique, she appealed to her group as fellow students: she asked them to do it as a favor, to help her get a good grade although, in truth, her grade was not contingent on their completing the activity. On the last day of class, the group invited Kathy to join them for lunch at the local Pizza Hut, in her view a sign that they had accepted her as their friend. In her journal, Kathy connected her group's high level of comfort with their "shared authority." Quoting from Wendy Bishop, she noted her group's "'strong group identity and sense of shared community' (1988, 122)," and she characterized her group's dynamic as "balanced and comfortable." To Kathy, this comfort was bound up with their trust in her as a fellow student as well as their trust in her leadership. She wrote, "I think they trust me much more now than they did when we started this project. I try to only use my authority when I feel that they are not working up to their full potential."

Yet Kathy's comments also dramatize the irony of the tutors' efforts to deflect power. When Kathy admitted to asking her group members for help she really didn't need and invoking her authority at critical moments, she revealed the unacknowledged tension between her view of herself as a trustworthy group member and her restrained but inevitable authority within the group. Likewise, when Casey described herself "giving responsibility back" by "pushing" her group members to elaborate, and when Allison "made herself a peer," they were illustrating Lunsford's caution that "collaboration often masquerades as democracy when it in fact practices the same old authoritarian control" (1995, 37). In Lunsford's view, truly collaborative tutoring, like truly collaborative classrooms, is based on

social constructionist theories of knowledge making, so that "power and control [are] constantly negotiated and shared" (41). In our seminars, we had emphasized social acts of invention coupled with negotiation of group authority, and it was this approach to tutoring that most of the peer group leaders tried to enact in their workshops. Ultimately, however, embedded in every gesture to *share* authority was a gesture *of* authority.

According to Grimm, writing center tutors will often "respond to institutional hailing by readily assuming the positions constructed by the institution" (1999, 70). Likewise, the peer group leaders' subject position (and, Grimm would say, "subjected" position) in their peer groups seemed to be elective, natural, and normal; they seemed to be choosing to become insiders in the basic writing class in order to limit the authority they exercised, when, in fact, they continued to exercise their (limited) authority. Moreover, their power as students and tutors was actually quite illusory and complicated, being inescapably bound up with the educational discourse(s) that regulate the conscious and unconscious desires of teachers, tutors, and students.

PEER GROUP LEADERS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF AUTHORITY

As I have tried to suggest, the peer group leaders worked to sustain their peer memberships within their groups not only because my seminar classes continually rehearsed this perspective but also because they saw positive results when the groups operated more democratically. However, these efforts often conflicted with their own preconceptions about classroom authority (as well as with their group members' preconceptions, which I will discuss below).

Thus, despite my reassurances throughout the semester, Kathy, who had characterized her group role as that of a trustworthy friend, felt that she was not handling her group's process effectively, and she repeatedly mentioned not "feeling like a teacher." Kathy believed that effective teachers were autonomous, authoritative, and directive, although she had experienced democratic instructional methods in her own college classes. As a result, she deemed her peer-oriented approach to peer group leadership a shortcoming. She remarked often that she was "not good at motivating" and that she was "not good at being the 'person in charge.'" Early in the semester, she described herself feeling like "an inexperienced substitute teacher because I usually let them take control of me." Only once, when three members were absent and she had worked one-to-one with the remaining student, did she assert that she "felt like a teacher for

the first time." In one sense, we might say that the peer group leaders harbored ideas about tutoring characterized by Lunsford as the "Storehouse" and "Garret" models (1995; for application of these terms to composition theory, see Brodkey 1987; Lunsford, 1992). When they talked about "being in charge," they were conjuring writing centers (or previous classroom experiences) where tutors (or teachers) "possess" knowledge or have access to knowledge from external sources, situations where tutors remain in control of the teaching and learning. When they talked about "being good at motivating," they were conjuring instructional support where knowledge, residing "within" the waiting tutee, is drawn into consciousness by the skillful tutor (or teacher) (Lunsford 1995, 38–40).

Of all the student mentors, Anne had the greatest difficulty mediating the tension between her various roles. Like Kathy, Anne held as sacred the teacher's authority; she believed that teachers should transmit knowledge to eager and compliant students. Prior to becoming part of the peer group leaders seminar, Anne had little experience and almost no personal contact with weaker academic achievers, and she repeatedly marveled at her writing group's failure to "appreciate" their opportunities to revise their work and their reluctance to make the suggested changes to their drafts. In her log, she remarked, "Personally, I don't think they realize how important it is for all of them to be there when we peer edit. It boggles my mind that they wouldn't want to take advantage of this, but that's just me. Their attitudes toward the class are a lot different than mine." In addition to what Anne noted as a marked contrast between her group's "work ethic" and her own, gender issues seemed to be more pronounced in her all-male group than in the others.

The conflict between roles and Anne's desire to assume a more instrumental teacher role were reflected in her comments: "Sometimes I feel like I'm showing too much leadership by always having to address questions about their papers. On the other hand, there are some days where I feel like I'm not showing enough leadership or any for that matter. I can't seem to find a happy medium. . . . I realize that the group sessions will never go as *perfectly* as I would like them to" (emphasis added). Quoting Vidya Singh-Gupta and Eileen Troutt-Ervin in her final project, "Why Groups Fail," Anne observed that "'one group leader cannot play all roles effectively, and in well-functioning groups, roles need to be shared so that tasks are accomplished efficiently within a warm group climate' (1996, 132). Because I carried the label of Peer Group Leader, all of the roles that are needed in a successful group were placed on me." I would argue

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that consistent with her notions of institutional hierarchy and instructional authority, themselves consistent with her cultural values, Anne identified with the role of teacher, rather than peer group member, and could not find a way to imagine an alternative role for herself throughout the semester.

Other compositionists who have used classroom-based tutoring models have likewise noted inherent conflicts among the various roles mentors are asked to assume. In a conference talk anticipating her chapter in this volume, Nicolas describes her experiences at Ohio State, where the upper-division theory course for tutors emphasized long-range, one-to-one support, while the peer response groups that the tutors worked with needed immediate feedback for short-term revision (1999). In this, her initial endeavor into classroom-based writing tutoring, Nicolas found the classroom tutors in her Ohio State study were not necessarily adept at facilitating peer groups and were caught between their desire to function as peers, whose suggestions were part of a body of feedback, and their more familiar teacher/tutor function of offering specific, valued commentary. This confusion of roles led to frustration for both tutors and students, and for this reason, Nicolas believed the project to be at cross-purposes.

In her study at CUNY, Soliday (1995) found that in many classrooms, instructors had difficulty defining their tutors' roles and gave them little or no responsibility for classroom activities. These classroom tutors characterized themselves as "outsiders" and, unsurprisingly, had few students who sought them out for supplementary tutoring in the writing center. In contrast, tutors who worked continually with the teacher to define and extend their classroom participation engaged in greater numbers of peer tutoring appointments. Noting the necessary tension between learning center and teacher-based roles, Soliday believes her most successful tutors "assimilated into classroom culture without losing a sense of their difference" (69). Although Nicolas and Soliday come to opposing conclusions about the degree of integration possible for tutors in writing classrooms,[5] both recognize role conflict as an inevitable feature of such programs.

Notably, in "'Peer Tutoring': A Contradiction in Terms?" Trimbur (1998) argues that the categories "peer" and "tutor" are logically contradictory: the moment a student tutor is recognized as more knowledgeable than the tutees seeking assistance, he or she loses "peer" status. As a result, tutors are naturally caught within a conflict in loyalties to fellow students, on the one hand, and to "the academic hierarchy" that

recognizes them as equals on the other (118–20). When tutor training places tutors in the role of "apprentices," Trimbur argues, they never learn to affiliate with their peers as shared learners and become, instead, junior writing teachers.

From a sociocultural perspective, Grimm (1999) explains that the ubiquitous, regulatory role of literacy practices produces for writing center workers "psychic conflict" by sustaining traditional views of tutors and learners in the face of alternative scripts and experiences. Written into the discourses that define teachers, tutors, and students are tacit assumptions about what counts as knowledge. As a central literacy practice, composition is enmeshed in its own contradictory gatekeeping and emancipatory functions, a system of sustaining traditional power relations by perpetuating a particular construction of literacy achievement. Writing tutors are likewise implicated: believing that they have chosen a particular set of literacy practices, they unconsciously advance their singular perspectives. When tutors pretend this is not the case by denying their own social constructions, or when they assume a therapeutic stance and insist that they are offering tutees what they need to succeed in "the real world," they experience anxiety as a result of the "ambivalent psychic effects of social power" (71–72).

As these theorists show, the conflicts experienced by my peer group leaders arose not simply from a personal decision to behave authoritatively or nonauthoritatively, but rather from a complex network of role attributions bound up with their group members' attitudes and behaviors, with their seminar relationship with me, and with the extents and limits of their institutional authorization.

BASIC WRITERS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF AUTHORITY

If the tutors experienced conflicts arising from their own conscious and unconscious conceptions about teaching and power, they faced even greater pressure from their writing group members. There was no question that the basic writers wanted their peer group leaders to assume the role of surrogate teachers, despite the efforts the leaders made to sustain a peer relationship and despite the group's achievements when the leaders performed as peers. Almost all of the students in my basic writing class attributed their progress as writers to their work in groups and to the guidance of their student mentors. On the end-of-semester assessment questionnaires, sixteen out of seventeen basic writing students indicated their satisfaction with the workshop arrangements. One student wrote,

"My peer group leader was an excellent leader. She helped me greatly with my papers. It always made it much longer and stronger. . . . She showed me what I was doing wrong and how to fix it."[6]

Many comments reflected the tutors' efforts to decenter their authority, although they also reveal that group members repeatedly characterized their leaders as more than peers. One student remarked that his leader "kept the group in check," and another noted that his leader "did a fine job because when we needed to do a little more or if she saw something we didn't she kept going till someone else hit on it." A third student commented: "Sometimes in a small group it is very helpful to have a little teacher to make everything run smooth and help out if your other classmates don't know the answer." The choice of the phrase "little teacher" is telling. Like their peer group leaders, many of the basic writers had "Storehouse" or "Garret" instructional models in mind and most were eager to vest their mentors with authority and to follow their lead.

To my knowledge, the basic writers never attempted to negotiate their group's workshop procedures or alter their practices. In the seminars, I had stressed that peer workshops were an intermediate stage in a longer process of production and urged the tutors to focus on invention and revision of conceptual and organizational issues rather than on end-product mechanics. As a result, a number of basic writing students complained in their end-of-term assessments that their groups had not spent enough workshop time on grammar and mechanics, since writing group advice was generally content centered. Typically, they described their workshop activities in this way: "Our peer group focused on everything. I noticed though [that] I didn't get much help with commas and capital letters and all the grammar." In their practice and comments, the basic writers deemed it appropriate and natural that the peer group leader would set the agenda, emphasizing certain kinds of writing issues while de-emphasizing others. The fact that the group might have pressed for alternative arrangements seemed outside their possible considerations.

Composition theory makes us aware that literacy practices are never ideologically neutral. Beyond the conflict of student power relations, beyond the possibility that students can ever be "written" as something more or less than "student" is the question of how labels like "basic writer" and "peer group leader" construct student identities. Thus, it is not enough to attribute power relations within the writing groups to the tutors' (overdetermined) views of literacy practices and constructions of self and Other. Also at stake are the basic writers' self-constructs,

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inextricably bound up with their powerlessness to contest their writing class placement, their designation as "developmental" writers, and the university's attendant silencing of "nonacademic" discourses.

In Tim's group, the students' desire to invest authority in the peer group leader was especially evident. Like Kathy and Allison, Tim had assumed for himself a collegial role and never deviated from that path. He did not intervene in his group's process beyond establishing procedures for reading and response. When members did not offer suggestions, he did not prompt them or press them to elaborate. When the group went off task, he went with them. But in the end, his group's comments reflect disappointment. They wanted more direction and extended critique of their writing, and they felt shortchanged. Their apparent desire for leadership suggests how uncomfortable students seem to be with their own authority and how willing they are to recenter power relations in decentered classrooms.

In contrast, Anne's group, whose values Anne had characterized as so different from her own, resisted her authority and, in doing so, resisted too her efforts to generate collaborative intercourse among them. Anne, who had wanted her group to run "perfectly," viewed herself as teacher surrogate and expected her group members to embrace and appreciate her guidance, but her group resisted her at every turn. Generally, they were unresponsive to her questions and promptings, often they brought only partial or hastily written drafts to the workshop, and only one member actually revised any of his essays after their meetings. There were certainly a number of variables that could have affected the group: gender issues, dismay at their basic writing placement, extremes of ability within the group. While I think that all of these contributed to the difficulties Anne faced, her desire to control the group process resulted in her having no control at all. Her group expressed its antagonism to her excessive leadership by resisting peer engagement, leaving Anne to do all the work.

Grimm (1999) observes that by its very nature tutor authority secures the internalization and projection of social regulation, including the subordination of basic writing students to the bottom of the educational hierarchy. Yet, regulatory efforts do not always succeed: the paradox of agency is not simply that we are dependent on the discourses that construct our self-definition but also that these discourses are always in conflict. Within these conflicted discursive spaces are, Grimm suggests, sites of resistance *and* capitulation, sites that appear to concentrate power around student

subjects. Still, it is unclear whether these sites are, finally, only illusory or temporary respites from the forces that will ultimately restore authority to traditional institutional structures.

POWER RELATIONS IN THE SEMINAR

Just as the basic writing workshops challenged students and tutors to negotiate and reconceptualize issues of power and authority, the seminar class brought similar challenges home to roost, throwing into confusion my plans for decentered teaching and learning. From the start, I had intended to have the peer group leaders set the agenda for the seminars, leading discussions of the readings, determining topics of concern or interest, deciding what was to occur in their basic writing workshops, and generally taking on greater agency and authority as the course progressed. Because of their active leadership role in their groups and their qualifications, I expected that authority and power would be shared among us, and I viewed these students, if not as my peers, certainly as junior colleagues, like the relationship between some graduate students and graduate faculty. To this end, in their syllabus I wrote: "This is your course. You will learn more and be a stronger peer group leader by actively investing in the dynamics of this course. Please let me know how things are going for you and how you want things done. I would like you to be the decision-makers, especially in terms of how you orchestrate your writing groups."

As I explained earlier, my desire to share power was motivated in part by my commitment to decentered educational processes. In the small seminar of education majors, I wanted to model what I believe is the best kind of learning experience: one in which students actively participate in all phases of their own learning process. But I also saw in this select group of students a kinship associated with their gaining "insider" knowledge about teaching writing and about the discipline of composition. Each Friday, they confronted the problems we all face when we work with developmental writers; group members became their "students" as well as mine, and we shared a common interest in their progress.

However, the peer group leaders did not seem to want to accept the kind of authority I was offering. When I asked them what issues they wanted to discuss, they lowered their eyes. When I asked them whether they had problems relating to the assigned readings, they didn't respond. After the fourth seminar, I wrote in my log: "I am disappointed in the seminars and trying to change them. I've asked students to lead various

sessions. Casey really did not want to lead the session on listening and reading, and no one seemed inclined to respond. Tim is supposed to lead tomorrow, but he has not yet contacted me about his plans."

I knew that the problem wasn't just the difficulty of the course materials, nor was it the fact that none of the students had ever before been asked to connect theoretical issues raised in the articles to their own practices in the classroom. In retrospect, I realize that their discomfort in the seminar was related to their reluctance to assume teacherly authority, and that this reluctance was not simply a matter of their personal choice but a function of the powerful social and institutional forces that constructed them as "good college students." Although they openly talked about their instructional challenges and about individual students in their groups, they could never define themselves as my composition colleagues nor as writing instructors. In fact, they seemed to think that my desire to extend this authority to them was somehow a trap that would ultimately affect their course grade.

As Rick Evans explains, citing Bruffee, many successful students "typically assume that the only important classroom relationship is that 'one-to-one relationship' between themselves as individual (and isolated) students and their teacher. . . . [T]hese students rarely recognize genuine open-ended interaction or collaboration of any kind among themselves or with their teacher as valid learning experience" (1994, 155–56). Testifying to Evans's observations that high-achieving students often believe that "they learn only when they talk in response to the teacher's questions or when the teacher talks at them" (155), my peer group leaders unself-consciously stated that their own favorite classes were lectures. Anne asserted, "I hate classes where students do all the talking because then you don't know what the teacher wants." Kathy added, "When students sit around and talk, you don't really learn anything. There are so many opinions and you don't know what the right answer is." Tim said, "I like classes where the teacher tells us what he wants us to know and then we can give it back to him."

Evans (1994) notes that education majors in particular expect the instructor to maintain central authority in the classroom and that they anticipate this hierarchical role for themselves when they become teachers. They invest their teachers—and anticipate for themselves—what Mary O'Hair and Joseph Blase categorize as "legitimate power," a view that authority derives uncontested from the teacher's position (1992, 12).[7] Allegiance to this mindset is hegemonic. Successful students learn

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the roles expected of them, roles that sustain traditional power relations, and they learn to believe that such roles are "good," "right," and wholly "natural" (Grimm 1999, 69; see also Trimbur 1998, 118). From the tutors' comments about learning and teaching, it became clear that although they were themselves working in collaborative frameworks in the basic writing class and in the seminar, they continued to invest in authoritarian, top-down instruction when they characterized their own preferences.

Thus, problems of hierarchy and power cannot be attributed merely to students' predilections or even to their academic insecurity. Power relations are a significant and inevitable feature of every teacher-student engagement, even for those of us who would have it be otherwise. In the first place, as Hubbuch (1989–90) explains, students need an understanding of their teachers' expectations in order to be earn high grades. Asking the instructor "What do you want?" expresses the student's desire to fulfill appropriately a particular social requirement. While Hubbuch recommends class discussions that explain and interrogate alternative classroom arrangements, she stresses the teacher's need to recognize the ways in which apparently egalitarian classrooms mask, but do not eliminate, hierarchical control (37). According to Tobin, teacher authority is especially intrinsic to "democratic" process writing classrooms (1993, 20).

From the perspective of these theorists, I was naive to think that I could surrender my authority in the seminar, even as I attempted to diffuse it. For example, I tried to decenter control by circumventing the issue of seminar grades, but the peer group leaders would not permit me to do this. At the outset, I had indicated that they would each receive an A in the course. I told them that I expected them to do superior work, complete quality assignments, and capably facilitate peer groups, and, in fact, they met my every expectation. However, as Tobin astutely observes, "Stop giving grades and they remain just as significant. In fact, although we like to believe that we can relieve tension by not grading, the opposite is often the case. When we stop giving grades, everyone gets tense" (1993, 70). In my case, tutors' concerns were directly related to my evaluation of the basic writing students' essay grades, which, they believed, reflected their instruction and guidance. If a student's essay was returned with a C or, worse yet, a request for further revision, they worried that this evaluation would affect their grades in the seminar.[8] Although we discussed at length the issue of writers' grades and although they acknowledged that basic writers often need a great deal of practice and feedback to achieve the A's

or B's they desire, the peer group leaders continued to feel responsible for their writing group members' final products, and they continued to worry that their students' success was implicated in their grade for the seminar course.[9]

Even more crucial than grades, however, the peer group leaders' apparent reluctance to assume equal power in the seminar was caught up in the conflicting roles that defined them in their various educational communities. In the seminar, I had introduced composition studies research and had hoped that they would develop theoretical insight into the practices they were initiating in their peer groups; I had hoped also that, as future teachers, they would begin to formulate their own set of principles about writing groups and writing instruction. At the same time, I had hoped that their experience with writing groups would help them to appreciate the importance of peer collaboration in their own academic lives. The seminar represented my effort to bridge the tutor-as-teacher versus tutor-as-peer dichotomy by bringing tutors into classroom writing groups equipped with some theory but also with an even stronger inclination to collaborate. I was going for, in Trimbur's words, "just the right amount of expertise and theory mixed with just the right amount of peership and collaboration" (1998, 120).

Ultimately, I failed to see the contradiction inherent in my desire: when peer group leaders affiliated with me, they were participating in the gatekeeping functions of hierarchical academic figuration (Grimm 1999, 34–38); at the same time, when they affiliated with their peers, they were defining the limits of their own authority as students. Furthermore, my hope that the tutors would choose to affiliate with their group members implies that such discursive agency can actually be effected. In the end, the tutors could neither accept my invitation to share authority in the seminar nor could they sustain their roles as peers in the basic writing classroom because the entire structure of institutional power militated against the possibility that such a construct could be sustained.

THE PARADOX OF AUTHORITY IN DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOMS

This study offers a small window into the relations of power that were constituted, deferred, and reconstituted for particular groups of students in two university classes. But as Alice M. Gillam reminds, "the peer tutorial relationship ought not be considered in terms which ignore the multiple other collaborations which intersect in the peer tutorial encounter" (1994, 50). Thus, I need to acknowledge various other collaborative

networks that influenced my basic writing students, including engagements with assigned essays and articles, with me in classroom and conference when the peer group leaders were not present, and with other peers in the writing class. These "sources" likewise influenced how the basic writing students interpreted their writing group activities. Likewise, I need to take into account the operations of power among group members, recognizing, for example, that gender, writing ability, and competition for peer group leader approval may contribute covertly to hierarchies and exclusions. (For a relevant discussion of competition in process classrooms, see Tobin 1993, 89–113). Further, as Lunsford so honestly reveals in her analysis of her graduate seminar, even the most democratic classroom practitioners may fail to recognize or acknowledge the "silent supports" for authority and power historically configured into the instructor's role or unconsciously fueled by his or her own desire (2000, 73).

Thus, I need to reflect on my own behaviors: was I sending mixed signals about my desire to decenter my seminar or basic writing class? Was I inviting the peer group leaders to share authority but all the same revealing doubt about their expertise as tutors or mentors? According to Ellen Cowne and Susan Little (1999), primary and secondary school cooperating teachers often worry that their inexperienced student teachers will not effectively cover the material or will simply teach the material "differently," and as a result, they continue to try to control the instructional environment. College writing teachers too tend to be quite possessive about their classrooms and methods. Certainly, I gave the peer group leaders full responsibility during the group sessions, removing myself from the workshop. Certainly, I encouraged leaders to try out different approaches to writing group facilitation and to peer response, and I praised and rewarded these efforts. Yet it is also true that I felt more separated from my writing students than I am used to feeling and that I worried about whether this group of basic writers had received enough assistance. Thus, while one kind of power struggle involved a desire to "recruit" writing tutors as my colleagues, another may have involved my need to remain in control of the writing instruction, a situation threatened by the presence of tutors in my classroom.

Of course, attributing authoritative conflict to my desires or to the peer group leaders' apparent response suggests that teachers and students can simply take on alternative roles like donning new baseball caps. It does not account for the broader cultural and social implications of role conflict within the peer groups and seminar. Invoking a Newtonian

metaphor, we might say that when peership and student collaboration seem to tip the balance in favor of a student collectivity, institutional discourses exert equal and opposite pressure to "center" traditional authority, by "recalling" or clarifying for students their various unequal roles. As Grimm (1999) argues, tutors will strive toward teacher positions because they have internalized a particular culturally based instructional script and thus self-define their teacher-tutor roles. However, competing scripts serve as forceful reminders that tutors are students, not teachers, inscribing self-definitions of powerlessness and limited expertise. Ironically, these latter, persistent self-descriptions engender affiliations that create possibilities for engaged peer group work. But because of competing institutional affiliations, because institutions configure tutors differently than basic writers, their peer relationships are fragile and temporary.

Lunsford (2000) has suggested that our efforts to create newer, more democratic instructional models will be circuitous and complex. Even as we try out these new paths, we observe not only that particular pedagogies promote particular sets of values, but also that these liberating moves are readily co-opted by the discourses they were meant to redress. Yet our publications and practices insist that composition classrooms offer possibilities for interrogating and recasting relations of power. Therefore, if we want our students to experience nonhierarchical forms of learning, we will need to make explicit what is at stake in this effort. When we bring peer group activities to student writers, we must encourage them to reflect on their roles as well: to examine the bases of the choices they believe they are making and to consider the threatening potential of student collaboration. When we introduce students to peer leadership or mentoring roles, those that so readily appear to flatter them as surrogate teachers or construct them as "merely" students, we need to help them to recognize and interrogate the institutional supports that reinforce traditional power arrangements. Finally, our efforts to engage and collectivize our students on issues of authority and institutional power should encourage us as writing instructors and as members of academic communities to face squarely our own complicity with and resistance to these institutional structures.