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CHAPTER FIVE

Peer Tutoring and Institutional Change

Institutionalized peer tutoring began as an educational experiment during the early 1970s. Today it is an accepted part of American college and university education almost everywhere. Focused at first almost exclusively on writing, peer tutoring eventually found its way into general education or "core" programs and sometimes even into upper division courses. There is hardly a college or university now, from Berkeley to Brown, from Harvard to Hostos Community College, that could do without it.

The formula is simple and familiar. Working through academic departments or through some designated structure such as a "writing center" or "learning center," the institution selects undergraduates to work one-on-one with other undergraduates. Tutors meet students they tutor either individually or in small groups to talk through the academic problems that the tutees have brought to the session. The way they do it depends on the program's "philosophy" and how it is organized. In some programs, they may meet informally in a space set aside for them somewhere in the library, the student center, or a dorm, or they get together over coffee in the cafeteria. In others, they may meet formally in a classroom during class time set aside for the purpose by the teacher. Teachers may require detailed reports about what the tutor and tutee discuss and what the tutee accomplishes, or they may not. Tutors may work with tutees only when teachers send students to see them, or their meetings may be entirely voluntary, anonymous, and "drop-in."

The day-to-day, short-run educational effects of peer tutoring result from the fact that, regardless of the subject, the issues tend to come down in one way or another to reading (texts, documents, word-problems) and writing (papers, lab reports, exams). Peer tutors usually deal best with these issues, furthermore, when they assume that their tutees' academic problems result primarily from not being able to organize, synthesize, and apply what they know, or from not being able to negotiate the conventions of traditional classroom education.

That is, peer tutors work best when they do not regard students in the foundational way, as tablets waiting for imprint, but in a nonfoundational way, as members of a variety of knowledge communities, related and unrelated. What tutees need is help in translating the terms of the communities they are trying to enter—the academic and professional disciplines, people who read and write standard written English—into the terms of the communities they already belong to, and vice versa.

Peer tutoring based on this assumption can tip the scale from superficial and partial knowledge to a secure, mature, reliable, and possibly even creative understanding. As a process of intellectual and social engagement, it can involve students in one another's intellectual and social development. It can therefore help college and university teachers reach, indirectly, students who for a variety of reasons have not responded to direct instruction under traditional classroom conditions.

This important short-run, day-to-day effect of peer tutoring has been widely demonstrated. College and university teachers and administrators may be less aware of the potential long-run effect of peer tutoring. That potential was perceived and stated succinctly in a routine internal document promulgated by one American liberal arts college during the 1988–89 academic year. The genre and source of the document (an interim report generated in the office of the college president on progress implementing the college's "five year plan") attest to the fact that the views expressed in it are institutionally normalized: the report takes care not to say anything that is likely to raise hackles in any quarter of the campus.

One section of the report describes actions taken to enhance the college's well-established, well-supported, and successful writing center and peer-tutoring program. This section, like the report as a whole, pays appropriate attention to statistical and organizational detail. It notes, for example, that the college had recently added some fifty-three new peer tutors to its program. As a result, "2784 individual tutoring sessions were held" and "877 students attended group sessions." In this sober statistical context, the report makes the following striking assertion:

> Peer tutors have a potential to act as agents of institutional change, as revealed by . . . [the] faculty's acceptance [in one course] of the tutors' request for an all day faculty review (an experiment that proved to be an enormous success) and [in another course, the] professor's comment that a presentation to the department by the tutors resulted in changes in the way the course is taught.[1]

The tone of this passage and the facts of the case imply that, in this college and perhaps others, peer tutoring has already begun to have an impact well beyond its normal, expected, short-run, day-to-day educational effect on individual students. Furthermore, when this document says that peer tutors can be agents of institutional change, it is not referring to any old kind of change. It is referring to a particular and crucially important kind. When it talks about professors changing the structure of their courses and changing the way they teach a course as a result of suggestions made by peer tutors—that is, as a result of suggestions made by well-informed students—the document is talking about change that goes to the very root of the educational process. It is challenging traditional prerogatives and assumptions about the authority of teachers and the authority of knowledge. It is saying that peer tutors have the potential for helping to change the interests, goals, values, assumptions, and practices of teachers and students alike.

The passage also seems to imply that, in this case and perhaps in others, the institutional influence of peer tutoring may have two sources. One source is the peer tutors' own intelligence, persistence, political savvy, and understanding of educational issues. The other source is a full understanding on the part of faculty and administrators of the particular nature of the contribution that peer tutors can make to institutional change.

This chapter assumes that better understanding of that institutional influence can lead to a more widespread, systematic effort to tap the full potential of peer tutors. It answers the question, Why and in what way can peer tutors be effective, "as agents of institutional change"? The chapter argues, first, that the potential of peer tutors to serve as institutional change agents is a function of the degree of peership that tutors maintain between themselves and their tutees. Second, the chapter argues that peer tutors can contribute to institutional change for a particular purpose. That purpose is to foster in college and university undergraduates social maturity integrated with intellectual maturity—the capable intellectual interdependence described in the Introduction to this book.

Peer tutors can help colleges and universities work toward that goal by reaching beyond their immediate impact on students to bring about changes of four kinds: changes in relations among students, among teachers, and between students and teachers; changes in the prevailing understanding of the nature and authority of knowledge and the authority of teachers; changes in curriculum; and even (certainly in many cases the last domino to fall) changes in classroom practice.

The educational effects of peer tutoring, in the short and long run, depend on the degree to which tutors and their tutees are real peers. My dictionary (the *American Heritage*) defines *peer* as "a person who has equal standing with another, as in rank, class, or age." The editors

emphasize this point, repeating it in no uncertain terms: "*Peer* refers to an equal, not a superior." In peer tutoring this equality means, first of all, that the students involved—peer tutor and tutee alike—believe that they both bring an important measure of ability, expertise, and information to the encounter and, second, that they believe that they are institutional status-equals: both are students, clearly and unequivocally.

In any college or university setting, of course, institutional constraints and native ability favor some students over others. Students are never absolutely equal in ability, knowledge, and expertise. Somebody always knows more or is quicker to grasp than somebody else. Furthermore, peer relations in an institution are never entirely autonomous and uncompromised. Most of what peer tutors and tutees talk about is sketched out, and in some cases stipulated, by the college or university curriculum and the tasks set by the teacher of the relevant course.

But what compromises the peership required for peer tutoring is neither institutional constraints nor native ability. Teachers and teacher surrogates compromise peership when they directly intervene in students' collaborative work and when they assign tasks that unavoidably imply or reinforce the authority structure of traditional classroom education. The resulting differences in degree of peership among students distinguish both educational practice and educational kind. They divide peer tutoring programs, which appear under many names and rubrics, into two categories, the monitor type and the collaborative type.

The difference between the two illustrates once again the distinction between foundational and nonfoundational teaching drawn throughout this book. In some cases, the term *peer tutoring* is used to denote direct, centralized, monitor-like tutoring that mobilizes undergraduates as institutional manpower for prevailing institutional ends. In other cases, the term is used as it is used in this chapter, to denote a kind of collaborative learning: indirect, polycentralized tutoring that mobilizes interdependence and peer influence for broadly educational ends. Most peer tutoring programs these days are a mixture of the two.

Monitor-type peer tutoring, sometimes called peer teaching or near-peer teaching, is similar to the PSI "proctor" system, described in Chapter 4. It differs considerably in history, practice, motives, and goals from peer tutoring that maximizes peership and collaboration. The limitations of monitoring are implicit in its origins, the nineteenth-century monitor system widely used in British "public" (what Americans call private or independent) schools. This system engaged older or more advanced students to undertake some of the more onerous chores of teaching, such as drill and review, and thus make life easier for overworked teachers. In the monitor system, teachers chose the "best" students, according to prevailing institutional and personal criteria, to act in their stead. Monitors then exercised authority derived from this appointment over much of the academic work and even over the personal lives of younger or less advanced students. Thus, both the source of the monitors' authority and the extent of their power compromised their peer status, often, as the history of the British public school system testifies, well beyond any significant educational effect.

The degree of peer status involved in collaborative peer tutoring and in monitoring is the crucial difference between them. Collaborative peer tutors are not surrogate teachers. Monitors are precisely that. A surrogate teacher is anyone who replaces the teacher in the social structure of institutional authority, whether inside the classroom or outside it. Monitors, or near-peer teachers, grade down from a species of junior faculty at the top (graduate teaching assistants, section men, lab assistants, graduate students employed as tutors, full-time or part-time) to undergraduate teaching assistants, who, because they are usually about the same age as the fellow students they work with, can seem very close indeed to being their status peers.

What distinguishes each of these categories from collaborative peer tutors is that they are set apart institutionally both by the teachers and administrators who rely on them and by the students who work with them. They are thought of, by faculty and students alike, as being especially well trained for what they do. It is sometimes said that they have been "professionalized." As a result, they are not regarded, and in many cases do not regard themselves, as sharing fully in the vicissitudes, burdens, and constraints of normal student life. In the case of undergraduate teaching assistants, furthermore, the distinction is established, maintained, and sometimes emblazoned by the traditional ways in which the institution "trains" them and organizes their relations with other undergraduates. They are select, superior students who for all intents and purposes serve as faculty surrogates under direct faculty supervision. Their peer status is so thoroughly compromised that they are educationally effective only in strictly traditional academic terms. As such, of course, they can be very effective indeed. Giving individual, personal attention, they fulfill the promise of traditional teaching, which (as we saw in Chapter 4) assumes a one-to-one relationship between the teacher and each individual student.

In contrast, collaborative peer tutors are not surrogate teachers, and they are taught to make that fact clear to their tutees. They see the institution from the same place their tutees see it, from the bottom up. That is, collaborative peer tutors work within the institutional constraints that their tutees experience.[2] This means, for example, that in most cases

they do not mediate directly between tutees and their teachers. Peer tutors deal with classroom assignments as their tutees bring them in, beginning wherever it seems that the tutee bogged down—even if that means beginning at the very beginning. If they suspect that the assignment is miscopied or misunderstood, for example, they send the tutee back to the teacher for clarification, sometimes suggesting for the benefit of timid or frightened tutees how to ask questions that will get results.

Collaborative tutors may sometimes offer their own independent approach to the course's subject matter and method, but in contrast to monitors, their main purpose is to guide and support. When they instruct, it is to clarify that guidance and enhance that support. They engage in conversation with their tutees, helping them translate (as we saw in Chapter 4 and will see again in Chapter 7) at the boundaries between the knowledge or discourse communities they already belong to and the knowledge or discourse communities they aspire to join. The goal of this conversation between peer tutors and tutees is to help tutees internalize the conversation of the community they hope to join so that (as we saw the student we called Mary doing in Chapter 1) they can carry it on internally on their own.

This distinction between collaborative peer tutors and monitors is of course a matter of degree. No institutionalized collaborative learning, including collaborative peer tutoring, is autonomous. All of it is organized and directed by teachers or administrators, who are responsible for selecting and "training" peer tutors of whatever sort. Conversely, no monitor totally lacks autonomy. The educational effect of most monitors in helping students academically draws to some degree on their influence as their tutees' peers.

So, in saying that compromised peer status reduces the educational rewards that accrue from peer status, I am not saying that less learning necessarily occurs or that monitors are educationally of little value. Monitors give many students exactly the sort of help they want. But in saying that compromised peer status reduces the educational rewards that accrue from peer status, I am saying that the education provided is of a certain type. With less peership a different kind of learning occurs: more of the traditional, foundational kind, less of the nonfoundational kind that most people who are interested in collaborative learning, and thus most people interested in collaborative peer tutoring, are trying to bring about.

The degree of peership that tutors maintain with their tutees is governed largely by the way peer tutors themselves are taught to tutor. To some extent, of course, tutors teach one another to tutor, learning as they go along by watching one another and by exchanging tips and experiences. But most colleges and universities teach their peer tutors in some more systematic way, either in occasional meetings or, at best, in credit-bearing courses. The most effective tutoring courses are themselves collaborative. They help tutors learn to engage their tutees on substantive issues by fostering the tutors' own active membership in a coherent learning community.

When the subject to be tutored is careful reading and readable writing, for example, besides learning to write better while they coach others (other tutors in the tutoring class as well as their tutees), peer tutors can also undertake collaboratively a progressive set of analytical and evaluative tasks. These tasks can be on topics that emerge from their work as tutors, and they can focus on the form and substance of one another's writing: making distinctions, drawing inferences from data, adopting criteria, examining inferences according to those criteria, and formulating and explaining conclusions in useful ways.

A tutoring course that is itself collaborative can also help tutors consider the nature, risks, and potential of the nontraditional institutional role they play. The course can address institutional issues of a sort that college courses rarely address, such as the institutional status of students and teachers, and the relationship of peer tutors to one another, to college and university administrators, and to the general public, the latter often and most immediately represented by students' parents.

A course for tutors taught collaboratively can raise these issues in a particularly concrete way because of the ambiguities in a peer tutor's role relative to students and tutors on the one hand and, on the other, teachers and the institution. Discerning these ambiguities and discussing them in the tutoring course in a collaborative context can lead to discoveries about the educational implications of the limited role that peer tutors play relative to the fellow students whom they tutor—their peers. And it can lead to discoveries about students' role and their social and "political" place in a college or university.

In such a course, collaborative peer tutors can also learn some of the practical skills of dealing with people under stress. They can learn where students' most debilitating academic difficulties lie and how to deal with them, how to open conversations with reticent or fearful students, how to evade overdependent tutees, how to empower and encourage without raising expectations too high, and so on. In short, the course can help peer tutors bring to bear in an academic context the highest degree of social and institutional maturity they are capable of.

One of the most important goals of a tutoring course organized collaboratively is to prevent tutors from imitating their betters. Tutors have to learn how to guard against reverting to pedagogical type by becoming

traditional, foundational teachers writ small. The temptation to revert is strong because, as one of the peer tutors I taught several years ago put it,

> Being in a position to look at and analyze another's work and not be judged yourself produces a tremendous feeling of power. This feeling is bad for me and the tutee because it puts us on two different levels, which makes it difficult to work together.[3]

Another tutor put the point even more revealingly. Through peer tutoring she became

> conscious that I have a tendency to want others to adopt my values . . . Power, I have found, is something I like having. For example, a classmate of mine came to the Writing Center to meet with his teacher. He saw me there in my role as a tutor. The next day in class he asked my advice about his English paper. I enjoyed his asking my advice. The fact that he values my opinion makes me happy. What makes me unhappy is realizing that I do to others what I've always hated others doing to me—just evaluating work, not helping to make it better.[4]

The tendency of many tutees to turn peer tutors into little traditional teachers by depending on tutors emotionally and academically reinforces this temptation to reestablish the traditional, foundational teaching relationship between peer tutors and their tutees. Collaboration in a tutoring course can help reduce the tendency for tutors to adopt the role of traditional teachers. It does so by restructuring relationships among the tutors themselves. Collaboration encourages students to accept authority for helping one another learn and to acknowledge the authority of other students—their peers—to help them learn themselves.

I began to understand both the potential of collaborative peer tutoring to act as an agent of institutional change and the sort of institutional change that it could foster when for several years in the early seventies I taught a tutoring course myself.[5] Some of the details of this experience are relevant here because they suggest two traits of peer tutors that can make them exceptionally effective as change agents within a college or university. First, they understand (to mix metaphors rather crudely) at both a gut and a grass roots level many issues that are central to the nature and quality—and hence the future—of American higher education today. Second, from that understanding derives a distinct self-confidence, an unusual, mutually confirmed authority. More than any other group of students on any college or university campus, peer tutors know what they are doing and know the value and significance of what they do.

Besides the hoped-for result of producing, semester after semester, groups of able, hard-working, effective peer tutors, the tutoring course I taught had a number of unexpected results. One of these was the peer tutors' striking insights into the difficulties experienced by students who asked them for help. The first surprise was the tutors' impression that they were not dealing primarily with failing students trying to stay in school. They were dealing with C students trying to get Bs, B students trying to get As, and A students trying to stay A students. Some of them were even dealing occasionally with graduate students. One, sworn to secrecy, had been approached by a member of the faculty for help on an article he was writing.

The records that the tutors were asked to keep of their work confirmed this impression. These records were anonymous. They included only the tutees' class, how well they were doing in school—in some cases their grade point average—and remarks about the particular problem that the tutor and tutee worked on. From the first day, even during the era of "open admissions" (for which I had originally designed the program), more than half of the students the tutors worked with were in the middle range of ability and accomplishment. Peer tutoring turned out not to be a service for new or nontraditional students, although it served them, too. It turned out to be a service largely for the sorts of students who had always gone to college and done well there.

The second discovery the tutors made had to do with the kind of problems these middle-range students asked for help on. Sympathetic faculty and administrators, myself among them, expected that most of the students who asked peer tutors for help needed work on "assimilating subject matter." We expected that in, say, writing, the students who asked for help had problems that could be solved by helping them learn grammar and "writing skills." But the peer tutors began to find that their students' difficulties seemed to have a deeper cause. One tutor, for example, stumbled on the close relationship of self and language, when he reported that "many students whose writing is weak" feel that weaknesses in writing expose "weaknesses in themselves." Similarly, in mathematics and related subjects, semester after semester tutors rediscovered "math anxiety," which Sheila Tobias has written so perceptively about.

That is, the tutors began to think that the academic problems of many students may not stem from lack of ability or instruction alone. Some students appeared to be intellectually paralyzed. Their preconceptions about themselves, about their education, and about the world beyond college seemed to limit their belief in their capacity to generate ideas out of experience, either in the library or in life. To account for such a state,

some tutors felt that it was superficial merely to say that the students they dealt with had been poorly taught in high school or had watched too much TV. Their problems seemed to have an origin that was at once both broader and deeper, of an order that more sophisticated observers might call cultural and epistemological. Based on my own experience (reported in Chapter 1), that is certainly what I called it. Such students faced barriers to learning that were therefore intractable from the perspective of traditional college and university education.

If traditional classroom teaching had little effect on this educational paralysis, peer tutoring in many cases had considerable effect. Students who said that they did not know much at all about the subjects that they were supposed to be studying or that their teachers had asked them to write about, given the opportunity to talk with a sympathetic, knowledgeable peer, discovered knowledge they did not know they had. Many of them, the tutors found, could begin to identify and examine issues on these subjects, take positions on them, and explain them.

A gratifying confirmation of these observations about the nature and effectiveness of peer tutoring came from comments by an education reporter from the *New York Times* who asked one day to spend an hour alone with a half-dozen peer tutors. Their conversation seems to have rapidly become shop talk. He told me enthusiastically later that the sorts of things the tutors were doing with their tutees were exactly the sorts of things he had to do with many *Times* free-lance writers. He said he spent hours on the phone with them helping them pull their work together into some semblance of organization and coherence, getting them to deflate their style, wringing some understandable details out of their overgeneralizations, and bolstering their self-confidence. And to reach them, he had to learn to deal with them in much the same way as, he found, our peer tutors had learned to deal with their tutees.[6]

Related to the tutors' insights into the problems of their tutees was another unexpected result of the course: changes in the peer tutors' own academic work. Tutoring and its classroom counterpart, the organized, collaborative process of peer review, led in a single semester to dramatic improvement in the writing of some of the tutors, according to almost any measure: organization, style, perspicacity, balance, depth of understanding, tact. The tutors' willingness to read one another's writing and their ability to make constructive suggestions about it, instead of becoming (as we saw in Chapters 1 and 4) merely sharks and teddy bears, improved dramatically as well.

The literature on "cross age" tutoring in grade schools (older kids tutoring younger kids) has led me to expect some improvement in the tutors' academic work.[7] But nothing led me to expect that the thinking and writing of somewhat above-average undergraduates could "develop" so much so quickly through a process of peer interaction. Nor was I prepared for the degree to which the course tended to decrease the tenacity with which the tutors clung to familiar ideas and to increase their willingness to entertain new ideas. These developments were so rapid that it made me suspect that they were not "developments" at all. Rather, I began to suspect that the tutors had discovered, perhaps for the first time, an educational context into which they could adapt and bring to bear traits of maturity that they had already developed in other circumstances. Some of the tutors' comments when the class members debriefed one another during class discussion about their experiences as tutors, as peer reviewers of one another's writing, and as peer reviewees, confirmed this suspicion. For most of them, it was the first course they had ever had in which behaving in socially mature ways manifestly contributed to their success in the course.

A third unexpected result of the course was that it reduced the effect of one of the most serious and debilitating limitations of peer influence: the conservative tendency, potentially detrimental to academic development, that is seen in the anti-intellectual and anti-academic cast of many college and university social, athletic, and other extracurricular groups. As Newcomb and others have pointed out, although some extracurricular activities can help students learn social graces and can encourage change in personal values, they are also likely to increase students' tendency to conform to already established, comfortable, and even self-destructive patterns of behavior and thought. In the several "generations" of peer tutors that I dealt with, each class of which formed an exceptionally coherent group with its own distinct "personality" and style, this conformity never occurred.

The tutors themselves suggested why peer influence tends not to be a conservative force among peer tutors. Group solidarity is conservative, they said, because people in groups have power to reward and applaud one another for performing well within the conventions of the group and power to punish, humiliate, and exclude one another for infractions of the group's mores. These extreme responses tended not to occur among peer tutors, they suggested, for at least two reasons. First, most of them found that their growing loyalty to their class of peer tutors cut across their loyalties to other groups—ethnic communities, fraternities and sororities, teams, clubs. When I explained the process of reacculturation I had experienced myself (the tale told in Chapter 1) they were able to match my experience and even top it with added details and nuances. The increased awareness they garnered from these experiences tended, they felt, to "soften the edges" of their peer tutoring class group

so that it was less exclusionary and cliquish than shared experience and expertise might ordinarily have led it to be.

The other reason they mentioned was, of course, that the peer tutoring group was constituted in large part for the purpose of reaching beyond the group to other students. The coherence of the group depended in part on its members acquiring expertise as translators at the boundaries between teachers and students. This is a trait that (as we have seen in Chapter 4) peer tutors share with college and university teachers and that for the latter (as we shall see in Chapter 8) has important professional implications. Some peer tutors are in fact more expert in this respect, or at least more aware of their expertise and of its significance, than some of the faculty members they deal with.

Group solidarity did not push the peer tutors I worked with into stereotypical responses for still another reason. The tutoring course taught them to subdivide the socially and intellectually tricky task of peer evaluation into elements so limited in scope as to seem unthreatening to group coherence. When I originally subdivided evaluation in this way, I did not do it for this purpose. I did it to make the peer tutors better readers of other students' writing and thereby make them more effective tutors. But learning some of the criteria that are appropriate to evaluation and how to apply them reasonably, temperately, and constructively turned out to have a happy by-product. The peer tutors acquired incrementally a new set of values based on a consensus negotiated with other members of their group of peer tutors. The result was increased willingness to evaluate one another's work reasonably, temperately, and constructively. It appeared that I had been teaching my peer tutors "academic judgment" much as M.L.J. Abercrombie had taught medical judgment to her diagnostics class (discussed in Chapters 1 and 10), and with much the same results.[8]

Another happy by-product was that many tutors understood, and in some cases for the first time, some basic aspects of thought and conceptualization. For example, they became aware of varieties of logical sequence and contradiction, both as tools for explanation and persuasion and as patterns of resistance in learning: for example, that lists can be used as an aid to synthesis and judgment and also as a barrier against them. Their own work improved because, as a result of identifying these problems in the work of their tutees and their fellow tutors, they began to identify and resolve them in their own thought and writing. As one put it, the academic problems he confronted as a peer tutor "seemed to be a mirror image of my own."

Most peer tutors did not formulate these issues in received philosophical or psychological terms but on the hoof, so to speak, and in the community languages they had at their disposal, like the "heteroglossic" working terms we saw students improvising in Chapter 4. One tutor offered a revealing example of the practical level at which peer tutors tend to become engaged with ideas. "I recall one student I tutored," he tells us,

> who avoided detail like the plague. He was writing a report on the book *Dibs, In Search of Self,* which is about a troubled boy who closed himself off from the world and about the method his teacher used to bring him back. In writing this paper, the student did nothing but generalize. He was worried that the detail of the book was too tedious and irrelevant to his paper. But together we delved into the book and extracted the necessary detail for solid support. From [working on this paper] both of us realized that it was those "tedious" details that made the book enjoyable. It was mainly the ability of the author to relate her thoughts to concrete detail that made her writing good.[9]

The apparent simplicity of the transitional language that this tutor uses in describing a "writing problem" should not obscure the fact that these two students, peer tutor and tutee, were grappling with sophisticated issues: the relationship of concrete and abstract, attitudes toward and evaluation of sources, and levels of reasoning.

They were also confronting another, still larger issue, frequently ignored, that underlies the difficulties many students have in attempting to learn the nature of the relationship between generalizations and supporting detail. The tutee's overgeneralized writing and his "worry" about "those 'tedious' details" reveal anxiety about the nature of writing itself, a desire to find a level of discourse that is appropriate to academic writing, and possibly confusion about the relationship between style and what he believes to be the importance of his own ideas. His anxiety betrays a feeling common among students that writers have to dress up what they want to say with big words and highfalutin phrases because ideas expressed at a high level of generalization are necessarily more important (less "tedious") than ideas expressed more concretely.

What the example shows, in short, is that peer tutors do not deal with ideas complete and in the abstract. They learn to deal with ideas in their fluid, incomplete state of change, ideas as they are developing through conversation and social exchange. And they confront the insecurity, personal interest, and proprietary attachment that all thinking people feel for their own ideas, especially when expressed in words on a page. In this way, peer tutors and tutees alike can become more intensely aware than most undergraduates ever become of the fragility and uncertainty—and the inherent excitement—of intellectual work.

My understanding of the potential of collaborative peer tutoring to act as an agent of institutional change and my understanding of the sort of institutional change it could foster increased when I found myself having to answer the questions my colleagues asked, both on my home campus and elsewhere, when I described peer tutoring and the tutoring course I was teaching. They asked questions like, "Do peer tutors need a certain amount of political savvy when they deal with the teachers of the students they tutor?" "Do you talk with your peer tutors about how teachers will grade the students they're working with?" and "What do you do about the faculty members who are opposed to peer tutoring?"

Questions such as these revealed an apprehension about peer tutoring that, naively, I had not anticipated. Every question had both a short and a long answer. Yes, I said, peer tutors do need some "political savvy"—that is, a measure of circumspection and tact—if they deal with the teachers of their tutees. Yes, I do talk with peer tutors about grading practices. And no, I do nothing about faculty members who were opposed to peer tutoring, since if they choose not to work with peer tutors or allow their students to consult them, they do not have to.

And yet every one of the questions my colleagues asked had a subtext that my short answers evaded. If college or university faculty members framed a question about tact as a "political" issue and anticipated opposition that, on the surface, seemed unlikely (Who could reasonably oppose a well-organized, faculty-governed academic support service that demonstrably made life easier all around?), they were already perceiving peer tutoring as a potential threat to entrenched academic values and practices. And if faculty members asked about the relationship between peer tutoring and grading, an issue that peer tutors should never be involved in, they were already perceiving peer tutoring as a challenge to teachers' traditional prerogatives and classroom authority.

The suspicion that peer tutoring had something to do with institutional "politics" and classroom authority became of more than passing interest (as well as of practical interest to the peer tutors themselves) when, over time, other aspects of peer tutoring that I have referred to in this chapter began to emerge. First, within a decade after peer tutoring was successfully instituted in a few American colleges and universities, it became an almost universal practice, institutionalized and depended upon at almost every kind of institution of higher education. Second, peer tutoring was everywhere serving not only students at risk—the "nontraditional" and the "underprepared." It was serving a broad spectrum of traditional, well-prepared college and university students. Third, this broad spectrum of students was bringing to peer tutors everywhere academic problems rooted in intellectual, emotional, and cultural issues that were unrecognized, unaccounted for, and largely unaddressed by traditional classroom education. Finally, peer tutors were addressing these academic problems, experienced everywhere by a broad range of students, with demonstrable success.

In short, it began to seem evident that peer tutoring was a form of collaborative learning that presented an alternative to traditional college and university education. It was being broadly institutionalized to the benefit of many students. And although it caused some slight tremors beneath the traditional academic landscape, massive opposition seemed unlikely. One case I happen to be familiar with illustrated the potentially persuasive force that peer tutors could exert even under the most adverse conditions. The story goes that a certain institutionally influential, newly elected English Department chair sent a highly reputable, well-published professor, a medievalist and Chaucerian, to get the goods on the college's new peer tutoring program. The chair's goal, not so subtly bruited about (it was a tacit plank in his election campaign platform), was to sink the program.

The chair knew that the Chaucerian in question had rigorously traditional views and no particular fondness for institutional innovation. What he didn't count on was that the Chaucerian was also a person of great scholarly integrity. He spent almost a semester slowly and methodically examining the program, including interviews with the peer tutors, one of whom turned out to be one of the best students in his Chaucer class. He attended a national convention of college and university teachers that under normal circumstances he would have considered beneath contempt. And in the end, he turned in a report, to the dismay of the department chair and to the relief of the peer tutors (not to speak of the program director), that convinced a dubious administration to support the program wholeheartedly.

My experience with peer tutors as a faculty member and, furthermore, as a teacher of the tutoring course, demonstrated that peer tutors can be sensitive to institutional issues to a degree—and to a depth—that many other members of the academic community, faculty and students alike, tend not to be. Even without thinking much about it, some peer tutors will learn collaboratively how to affect and change their academic environment. In this particular example, the factor in their academic environment that they set out to change was me.

Naturally enough, I began teaching the tutoring course with a set of confirmed views about how peer tutors should be "trained." To the tutors' advantage, I had an interest in the program. I was curious about

it, and I had become professionally invested in its success. I was therefore, it could be argued, vulnerable to their influence. For a while, things went pretty much as I intended them to go. Toward the middle of the term, however, the tutors suggested one day in class that the program consider making some changes in the way the tutoring center was being run. Some of these struck me, on reflection, as hmm, well, perhaps worth trying.

But then those tutors had the audacity to suggest some changes in the way I was teaching the course. An institutional program is one thing. A professor's course is quite another. To these suggestions I found myself less receptive. Whose course was it, anyway? I asked myself.

In fact, I blush to recall, one day I asked the class the very same question. They laughed. Only gradually, as they worried me like a dog with a bone, did they work me around to acknowledging that the answer to the question might just be that the course was indeed not quite all mine. Only gradually could I acknowledge that classroom authority, in this course at any rate, might not be all mine, either. Whether I liked it or not, by virtue of the fact that the peer tutors could all, if they liked, take a walk, they contributed heavily to whatever authority I enjoyed in that course. My classroom authority depended in part on their willingness to acknowledge it. And if the students in the course contributed to my classroom authority, they might also have some claim to affect the direction that the course was taking. They might even have some useful expertise to contribute. In short, evidence that I could not gainsay began to mount that "my" peer tutors were already acting as agents of institutional change. And the evidence was firsthand. I was the bit of the institution they were undertaking to change.

But this insight into the potential of peer tutors "to act as agents of institutional change" raised more questions than it answered. For example, would my colleagues feel their influence in the same way and the same degree? Probably not quite, although clearly that Chaucerian had felt it. Hostile department chairs aside, the mere possibility struck me as intriguing.

At the point of acknowledging this possibility it occurred to me for the first time that a pool of suitably prepared (by which I mean, collaboratively prepared), thoughtful, articulate peer tutors might provide forward-looking institutions a new resource that could be effective at every level of decision making. The reason to consider drawing on this pool, it seemed to me, would be that peer tutors have expertise that many faculty and administrators lack. My peer tutors had shown me that they had an intimate, hands-on understanding of the constructive and conversational nature of thought and knowledge. They had seen the social construction of knowledge (of the sort we saw Mary experience in Chapter 1) repeated every day, and they repeatedly experienced it themselves. They had also witnessed and experienced themselves (with, for example, me) the many kinds of intricate and in some cases distressing relationships that occur between college and university students and their teachers.

The experience that administrators and faculty members have had with involving peer tutors in institutional decision making at every level confirms this impression. In many American colleges and universities since the sixties, undergraduates have contributed a good deal to institutional decision making, but with diminishing intensity and effectiveness. This decline is in part a result of the fact that the contribution is made in many cases by student representatives who are either elected members of student government or else faculty or administration appointees. Elected student representatives turn out, not surprisingly, to represent the limited interests of their constituencies, while faculty appointees turn out, also not surprisingly, to give voice to views that are little different from the views of those who choose them.

Student representation of this limited sort is of still less value if we regard colleges and universities not primarily as composites of quad, curriculum, and catalogue, but as composites of the people who, for the time being, walk the quad, teach the curriculum, and enforce the catalogue. The "institution," then, is precisely the interests and goals of these people, their values, what they know and how they know it, what they learn and how they learn it, what they teach and how they teach it, what they think of each other, how they treat each other, and the whole fabric of human relationships that exists invisibly within the walls of bricks and mortar.

Decision making in an educational institution understood in this way requires quite another sort of student representation: students seriously engaged in the same educational enterprise that the faculty and administration are engaged in, but with an informed, independent perspective. An institution's peer tutors comprise such a pool, if they have been suitably prepared, have plenty of expertise in tutoring, and meet a sufficiently broad range of student needs (possibly including, for example, peer counseling). College and university governance, from department curriculum to long-range institutional planning, could be profoundly affected by their influence. More to the point, students actively involved in collaboration, and neither afraid of it nor uncritically enamored of it as the solution to every problem that colleges and universities face, can help move whole institutions toward some of the changes explained in this book.

In these first five chapters I have discussed what I regard as the most important of these goals. They are changes in relations among students, among teachers, and between students and teachers; changes in our understanding of how we learn; changes in our understanding of what teachers do and of the nature of their authority; and changes in classroom practice. In the next chapter, I will discuss in that context a troublesome issue that is growing in importance and public visibility: how to fulfill the educational potential of electronic technology.