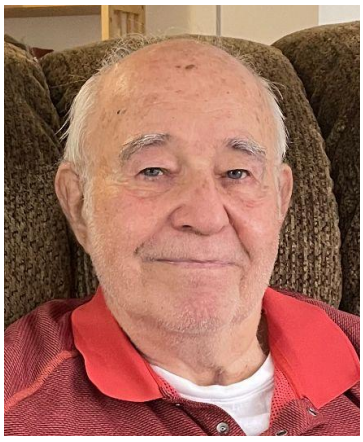
**Leo Zanderer: Oral History of Fifty Years of Teaching Writing at Brooklyn College and the 1970s Brooklyn College Writing Center**
**(Approved for Publication By LZ on August 2, 2021)**
(Developed from personal interview and emails with Sean Molloy)



In the early morning of June 23, 1938, only hours after Joe Louis defeated Nazi Germany's Max Schmeling at Yankee Stadium, I was born in Brooklyn. I was bred and schooled in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn near Lincoln Terrace Park, a safe and comfortable middle class Jewish neighborhood.

Both my parents had come to Brooklyn from Europe in 1920. (They either met on the boat or after they arrived here.) My mother was born in 1903 in Minsk Russia into a large family of three close Alpert siblings and their families. They decided in the first decade of the 20th century to come together to America. However, while her older sister and brother came across with her father and uncle and aunt and cousins, my mother, her three younger sisters, and their mother did not manage to get out until 1920, having had to experience both the War and a bloody revolution in their hometown of Minsk. (Growing up, I had many cousins on my mother's side, some of whom were ardent Communists.)

The war uprooted my father when in 1914 the Austro-Hungarian army entered his Galician shtetl (he said that backwater resembled "life in the middle ages") and pressed his father into service where he was killed on night guard duty that same day, leaving five children fatherless. My father's great love of languages, culture, and history can be attributed to his experience of Galicia (recently noted as a rich multicultural realm) where thinkers were informed variously by German and Jewish thought; these cross currents produced writers such as Paul Celan and Aaron Apfelfeld, both of whom wrote in memorium from the ground of the Holocaust.

My father's  birth family was a victim of the politics and violence of the 20th century. Having grown up as the oldest of his fatherless family, he lost his younger brother who was singled out in the 1930s by proto-Nazi thugs and murdered in Prague where he worked in a bank. His younger sister managed to come to Israel, escaped the holocaust, and was one of those whose despair led her to take her own life in 1950.

In Brooklyn, my father was a piece-worker in a factory sweatshop all his working life. He wrote poetry even as he framed ladys' handbags under a floor fan in summer. He read and spoke Hebrew and German and relished comparing versions of the Bible in those languages.
In a way his own fortunes in America had a tragic dimension. We were hit hard by the Great Depression.my father lost his job and (as did many) sold apples. A son born in the early 30's lived only five years during a period in which my Uncle William was murdered as an incorruptible building inspector in Staten Island. The sorrow of that time kept my mother and sister living with

depression. My sister experienced amnesia about her little brother's short life. She married Bernard Schwartz the eventual CEO of Loral Space, maker of satellites, and they became sponsors of culture and the arts as well as establishing imaging services in medicine at NYU Langone.

Moving me always is my father's European Intellectual heritage. In addition to his linguistic focus, he was an avid reader of classics and culturally sophisticated. While working in the sweatshop by day, he read Gibbon, Emerson, Heine, Mann, Diderot, Norbert Elias, Schopenhauer by night and on weekends, and caught QXR's nightly Symphony Hall, and Saturday's Texaco's operas as well.

He made me feel that writing was as with the French thinkers, "ecrits", mysterious in social and individual origin ,and came from a soul, from culture, was a culmination in Western civilization —as I believe also, if with its cruelties, and with its masters and heroes: Dickens, Goethe, Flaubert, Shakespeare, Cervantes, etc.

In my neighborhood most of us went on to college. I went to Tilden High School and then attended Brooklyn College where I was an English major. After I graduated Brooklyn College in 1960, I taught English at different high schools in Brooklyn for five years while I earned a Masters Degree in English Literature at NYU. I almost completed my Ph.D. there too, but I never found the time to edit down my unwieldy draft dissertation on Thomas Hardy. In those years, I taught at Boys High School, Sheepshead Bay HS, Midwood HS, and James Madison HS. I found high school teaching five-days-a-week onerous, but I loved teaching.

In preparing for this oral history, I've refreshed my memory about some details with documents from the Brooklyn College Archive and my own files. I've watched new video oral histories by student writing tutors Berardi, Villamanga, and Skerdal. I've also reviewed two articles that discussed our writing center: Dugger (1976) and Weinreich (1980). Both authors interviewed me at the time. Regina Weinreich also worked in our Writing Center as an adjunct for several years beginning in 1973. I refer to both articles below.

**Teaching at Brooklyn College 1965-1974.**

In about 1965, I got a job as a lecturer teaching composition courses at Brooklyn College through my friend Jack Salzman who was already teaching there. At the time, lecturers were being paid as part-time employees for full-time teaching work. We were part of the body of protesters striking under the guidance of Israel Kugler, head of a part-timers-dominated UFCT, joining the professors' union in challenging the CUNY colleges about schedules, salaries and tenure. In 1969—thanks to a judicial ruling for us as exploited, and a resulting first collective bargaining contract in 1969-- many of us were granted full-time positions and effectively a line towards tenure. I feel that Open Enrollment and our inclusion as faculty were related to a new way of understanding who the students were and what they needed. It was especially lecturers who could teach writing as an intimate personal connection between faculty and students. I began as a full-time lecturer in 1969, a year before Open Admissions began at CUNY.

**Ken Bruffee's Writing Program**

Ken's revolution as the new First-Year-Writing-Director in 1970 was to create writing groups of teachers. We met to talk about our teaching and our classes. Ken picked the leaders for each group and I think he chose me to lead mine.

Geri De Luca saw Ken's *A Short Course in Writing* as really a reworking of Sheridan Baker's *The Practical Stylist*, which was the composition text of the time. Bruffee's book began with very simple forms of the five-paragraph essay and developed it over a course. The threat to a lot of people was that Ken was oversimplifying the whole writing process. I don't think it mattered. It got tutors to learn how to tutor their course and it got students writing and it gave a good sense of a logical, organized, consistent essay. Ken was not a freewheeler in any way. He did not favor writing big, long sentences (which was my style) but was more precise and to the point.

The criticism of Ken's pedagogy within the English Department was in part that it oversimplified writing to the point where he reduced the essay to a robotic search for evidence. Here's my topic sentence. Here's my proposition. No introduction for a while. No conclusion, necessarily.

The idea was that new writers would have to know the basics. And that's what Ken taught the tutors, to help students write basic five paragraph essays.

The English faculty were not happy that their students were free to bring writing to the Writing Center, where the tutors might contradict their advice or talk about them. (Both of which the tutors did sometimes do.)

I also sense within Ken's inclusion of students as catalytic to learning writing, a kinship to Carl Rogers and group work, and even R.D. Laing and Cooper who made patients part of the healing process.

Likewise there is an implicit militancy in his programmatic approach to learning. He sent out regularly a thought provoking newsletter (called CADRE) to put before us various views on teaching. For example, he printed one student paper that was clearly semi-literate but also that displayed overall a subtle point of view and an undeniable building of a case based on an organization of evidence. Even the newsletter name "Cadre" presumed a kind of faithful Brotherhood which offended many in English who were proud of their position and independence in a democratic department. Ken shook things up.

I never adopted Ken's pedagogy in my own courses. Instead I taught a modes/genre course. I assigned a series of different kinds of essays: autobiography, description, event, a kind of home paper, place paper— all according to certain categories that I thought were very common in writing. So that's what my course was always about. I was always teaching English One or

English Two. In English I ended the term with literature, including stories that raised themes of racism like “City Rat” by Edward Hoagland and Hemmingway’s “Indian Camp.”

Writing is a way of fulfilling a sense of being alive, active, a person. It is a mode of self-discovery and can be itself a work of art. The freer and more open ended its production the more possible its being so to say, artistic, aesthetic. The traditional lesson plan with goals interferes with my kind of open class room, e.g. the reading and discussion of student papers as the ongoing work of the class. As, say, a painting workshop includes mutual observation of student works, so too might be the work of a writing class. The closer control of Ken’s course denies the adventure(!) that comes with a more open dealing with writing that I am trying to point to.

I love the New York school of Poets, O Hara, Schuyler, Ashbury, who write after Stevens, Whitman with a freedom of language, inventing as much as describing. My teaching of writing was informed by a love of such poetry.

Although my personal composition pedagogy was different from Bruffee’s model, I did not influence the way the peer tutors conducted writing sessions very much. I had conversations with them about individual sessions and how I felt that writing should go. These sessions didn’t involve big revisions. I was there to be sort of a “house master,” and keep them comfortable and happy. We didn't have deep discussions about writing together. I was happy when Geri De Luca took over as the teacher of the Tutor Training course in about 1978-79. I thought she was a great teacher. She had her sets of assignments and was not strict about coming up with propositions and evidence; she was more of an organic teacher.

**Joining the Writing Center in 1973-74.**

I did not work in the writing center when it first opened in January of 1973. I see from a Dec 15, 1972 letter from Maurie Kramer to Louis Walker that seven teachers four lecturers were appointed to work part-time in the writing center then: Peter Jucovy, Joshua Mills, Majory Odessky, and Mary Wollman (all assigned as part-time Lecturers), Marcia Silver (Instructor on a joint line with Educational Services), Regina Weinreich, and Janet Mayes (Adjuncts).

My sense was that Ken ran the writing center himself when it first opened in 1973. In the Fall of 1973 or 1974. It was housed in T1 right next to the SEEK (a Department of Educational Services program) Reading Center run by Rupert Jemmott and we shared some resources. SEEK was a program focused on minority students. I think part of the justification for the Writing Center is that we would serve the SEEK students. But we served the general population, a compromise of a sort. We served many Black students too.

There was a kind of revolutionary foment going on to get everyone to care about the SEEK students. And Ken joined it in the sense that he wanted to create something to help all students. He wasn’t very close to the SEEK people. He didn’t want to give up any control of the Writing Center. Not all SEEK students were Black, but SEEK really cared and had its own set of

obligations to support Black students. Black Studies was getting underway and some teachers were adding course readings beyond *Native Son and Black Boy*. Ken was part of that revolution in the sense that he cared as an educator who believed in embracing everybody. He believed all students could write well But he was not developing any kind of curriculum that would reach out to students of color. But he did not build a writing center that was streamlined to benefit any group of students. I don't think I would have been comfortable with that myself.

Ken's way of training me to work in the Writing Center by sitting in on his tutor training course. For about five years I received release time to run the writing center and I only taught one course by choice each semester. Maybe two. The lecturers' absurdly heavy courseload was four writing courses each semester. (After 1980, once I returned to the classroom again, I took on unfair schedules in my ad hoc leader of lecturers role.)

In about 1975, Ken took a sabbatical. Brooklyn College named a new Director of First Year English. Jack Kitch (and then in 1976 Michael Murphy) replaced Ken as Director of First Year Writing. Lilia Melani was also a strong Director. I also served as one of five supervisors of Freshman English while I was running the Writing Center.

Ken, as Carol Bay noted, had a gift for public relations. You could say I managed the troops and the training camp while Ken got us and himself on the map. He had some of the strategic brilliance, political really, that defined Obama's success and there was a conversion goal implicit in what might be called the selling of the writing center and collaborative learning.

While he was gentle, Ken was also very strong willed and persuasive about his new ideas, which created some tensions. I got along better with everyone in the English Department so we made a good team.

Until about 1975, I had been unofficially leading the day to day work in the WC while Ken remained the Director. I met with Ken and asked to be recognized as the Director and he agreed. I directed the WC until 1980. I might have used the title Coordinator or Director, but Ken stepped back. Marcia Silver, Geri De Luca and I all began to teach the tutor training course.

**The 1976 Dugger Article in *Change.***

In 1976, Ronnie Dugger came to our WC and wrote a profile about us for *Change* magazine. I was by then directing the Writing Center. Dugger called me the "Director." I also called myself the Coordinator.

Dugger wrote:

> One problem is that students and faculty alike sometimes expect either quick results or detailed remedial help, while Zanderrer says the center is committed to the idea that learning to write is "a slow process." The tutors agonize together over when to give information and when not to and they try to emphasize broad concepts. Professors who

> worry about authenticity, plagiarism, and grades sometimes fear that a tutored student's paper is not his or her work. Zanderer insists that the tutors are told not to be conned into doing other people's work for them. (31)

When I said the Writing Center "committed to the idea that learning to write is 'a slow process'" (31). I meant that you take time-- you do not finish your essay right away. You may overwrite it, without worrying about proposition and all that. Then you come back and read it. And think about it. And make changes organically, intuitively and see what you get. That's a lot more writing than Ken would have allowed— that's wayward and off the charts, so to speak. I'd look at a three-page rough draft and say "Cut it down here and here." I did not worry so much about propositions, because that's the way I wrote. In principle, revision and process was part of every paper in my own classes, although we never had time to do more than two drafts. In the 1970s, I don't think we called any of this "process" writing yet. We also read papers aloud in class, which Ken also did which was quite wonderful. But I think his focus was on finding a topic sentence or proposition. I asked what do you like about this paper? How do you feel about it? Does it feel finished? That kind of thing. That's why I taught writing forever. I loved that it was always this business of people coming together through their writing. It was wonderful.

In 1976, Dugger also wrote:

> Some faculty fear that the collaborative concept steals their students away and directs them into a relationship with other students that is not fruitful enough. But Zanderer believes one purpose of the center is to help the tutors temper their idealism and deal with defeat by realizing: "'There are some students I can't help.' Failure has to be a part of our experience." (31)

Regarding "failure. " I meant it probably as a way of judging and properly gauging if the tutor student connection was working well and not to suffer out of guilt the sense of failure as personal rather than circumstantial, e. g. , whereas perhaps another tutor might be a better fit. I don't think I then would have suggested the student maybe was beyond help. We tended to blame ourselves for too much as carers.

**The 1980 Weinreich Article about Writing Programs/Writing Centers at CUNY.**

Regina Weinreich was a writing teacher at Brooklyn College who worked in our Writing Center in those early years. She wrote an article about college writing at CUNY in August of 1980 for *The Village Voice*, titled "The Quiet Revolution Against Illiteracy." The article included a photo of Ken, Marcia and some Brooklyn writing tutors. Regina quoted me:

> According to Leo Zanderer, who was the center's director for five years, "Students in the better schools have dorms, cafes, fraternities, and possibly go home to a family that talks about books. Now, with the modern emphasis on television, on being out there physically instead of at home reading. Many of our students lack this background. The Writing Center's existence implies that if we are losing the

> context within our culture, we can replace it. The writing act can't be separated from the intellectual experience. So the center establishes an exchange by getting people to talk together in a sociointellectual context. The Writing Center involves what the writing act is all about— students, books, discussion with other people as a prelude to the writing act." (70-71)

Carl Rogers was a therapist who was important to me. And maybe to Ken too. Rogers believed in groups and all that. I used my own experience with therapy in my teaching. I really do feel that writing is a production of the soul coming into being. And the more you write, the more you have an experience of self in the world. I'm all for that. That informed my teaching all the way back to the 1960s.

Regina also described a class of her writing students at Brooklyn College in 1973. About her students: "Although no one liked to talk about it, they were semiliterate and it would take repeated semesters of reading and writing to get them to the freshman level." (69)

About our Writing Center, Regina wrote:

> "The center became a political target within the department and Bruffee was considered something of a radical upstart because he challenged traditional ideas: the isolation of the writer; the act of writing as a solitary chore; the only acceptable paper, letter perfect." (69).

We were pals. I admired her energy, ability, and ambition as a journalist working from outside our campus. But I sought a certain statesmanship regarding from within English, which was only in its early years of fairly democratic choice of chairs and policy.

Despite my lead role in challenging effective English/Brooklyn/CUNY exploitation of lower ranks, my liking of my colleagues and comfort with them separated me from adopting Regina's tough criticism of some of my colleagues as seeing composition as a course not really worth their degrees.

She also wrote:

> "No wonder the English Department pawned these students off on junior faculty. Who wanted to deal with the problems of particularly unskilled freshmen? Who even knew how? Some professors were insulted by their very presence; It fell to new instructors like me, fresh out of masters programs in literature to work out the problems. All the while, our efforts were associated with the diminution of academic standards." (69).

Regina thought as Professors did, that composition was a bad thing that came with the territory.

Regina 's take was right enough. But it is about how the writing course fed political stress, not its full possibilities, as per say Sartre referencing writing as a "gift " to the other, or as a bridge

between minds which was my way of understanding the course. We had a good number of full-time, non-Ph. D. Lecturer faculty who made up a core of freer types more comfortably ready to take on the papers to be given in basic writing as a deeper venture.

There were also the elitist "publish or perish" professors who merely saw burden, literature replaced by composition, and maybe too enlightened or too idealistic teachers like me seeing writing teaching as a high road. Choose your poison.

**My Role in the Writing Center**

Ken had founded a new Writing Center staffed by student-tutors in 1973 with the support of the English Chairman Maurie Kramer and President John Kneller. He asked me in 1974 to direct the center. Some faculty worried that the center created an implicit criticism of their teaching— that students teach as well as they did. Ken did believe in some ways they could do as well. I always thought there was a therapeutic aspect to the social interaction between students. It was a warm place and a confidence building place and creating almost a kind of home environment.

Ken mentioned Tom Hawkins and his ideas about collaborative learning to me in the 1970s. I met Tom Hawkins at a conference in about 1980 and asked if he had met Ken. He said he heard Ken Bruffee was using his stuff but that they had never met.

In Open Enrollment in the fall of 1970, enrollment jumped from 16,000 to 30,000 students. Ken's writing center was put into a temporary building T1). It was great because we were not part of the institutional roles— outside the walls of the penitentiary. We had grass around us, squirrels on the roof.

The set up was that Ken would teach a training course. (I eventually taught one too.) Ken would be the Director and another faculty would be sort of a sergeant keeping an eye on things inside the center. Ken inflamed faculty with his new ideas about freshman composition. They worried he would build up the importance of that in ways that affected their teaching in advanced courses— which did of course happen anyway. So some faculty resisted him. Some even resented him. The idea was that I'd get along better with everyone. I wasn't a scholar.

**Creating Satellite Writing Centers at Brooklyn High Schools.**

Throughout the 1970s, Ken and I meshed pretty well. We did not always agree. It was my idea to take the center out to the high schools. Ken did not agree. I added a couple of long range centers, including one at James Madison High School, run by Carol Bay for some years. (I had taught at Madison HS before Brooklyn College.) I got a BECON (pronounced beckon) grant to fund this expansion (Brooklyn educational collaboration of neighborhoods). It lasted for about 6 or 7 years. Geri De Luca took Brooklyn students to Madison to run the writing center there.

**Other Teachers and students in the 1970s Brooklyn Writing Center.**

Geri De Luca was very much from literature. She is unique in establishing calm and comfort in students and faculty , subtly charismatic.

Loretta Berardi I recall vividly and fondly. Hung Chan was a terrific tutor. Bob Cleary, Nancy Doyle, Daisy Goodman (daughter of teacher and writer Paul Goodman) and Frank McGann. Ken was very impressed by Heywood Hall, whose mother taught at Rutgers and whose dad was an early important civil rights leader.

After I left the writing center moved inside the main building to 1300 Boylan which I felt deadened the freedom of it.

Marcia Silver took over as the Writing Center Director from me in 1980. Marcia was very interested in teaching Ken's proposition and evidence focused pedagogy. Ken got a big grant that year to fund the Writing Center (maybe from NIH?) and I think he became very active in guiding it again with Marcia.

Marcia was a part-time teacher. She was very comfortable with Ken. Marcia worked in the writing center while I led it.

Lilia Melani was the First-Year-Writing Director in 1980. She fought to get more pay for women employees at Brooklyn College. Melani won a CUNY woman of the year award in recognition of her service to education.

**CAWS**

Ken was an extraordinary guy. He was part of the CUNY Association of Supervisors which I joined. We met on Saturday mornings; it included all the people who ran writing programs and writing centers at CUNY. Roberta Matthews was there. Marion Arkin ran the writing center at LaGuardia. Sondra Perl was there and had a very creative emphasis. Don McQuade was there too. Harvey Weiner, Marcia Cummins, and the great Mina Shaugnessy came and played major roles.

**My teaching at Brooklyn after 1980**

After 1980, I did have to give timed writing tests as final exams. Surely the exit exam in the first semester of basic writing created a block in which teaching towards the exam was the aim. In English one, I prepared my students for timed final exams by rehearsing with old exams.

I don't feel it was unreasonable to teach towards the disciplines, a kind of real world task. But I resisted failing students because of the exam. The exams triumphed over time; but we tried to resist them. In one of my classes an outside reader failed 16 of my students. I appealed to my Chair and she agreed that all 16 should pass.

But I know I increasingly tried to teach English 2 in which we created our own course and exam and I avoided comp one with its exam graded by other readers and with its younger, less savvy students.

I was for writing teachers remaining mostly literature people. I was against the new Ph.D. in Comp/rhet. I think I felt comfortable around Ken because he always remained a literature person.

DeLuca also urged me to add more woman writers to my literature survey courses. I tended to teach Shakespeare and Whitman. I was slow to add them and understand how to teach about the different perspectives of women teachers and writers. Geri introduced me to new women writers. We also shared an interest in poetry, which we both wrote.

I was very resistant to using technology in writing courses, including computerized grades and students writing on laptops. I was sad to see Shakespeare removed from many courses.

My deepest pleasure was in developing and teaching a survey course originally designed for non- English majors with a last shot at the great authors, variously English 10 andCore6, eventually becoming a last bastion of literature vs. choices of hybrids that included film and ethnically oriented books compatible with student diversity. My course, “Emerging Modernism” became one for brave, fairly cultured souls and I in my zeal packed in 37- 40 each semester.

It worked for me as compatible with my trust in the historical and philosophical depth of Western and Anglo American literature moving from Chaucer through Shakespeare and Milton and culminating in romantic and lyrical poets of modern times, Wordsworth, Whitman Stevens , Williams and Bukowski. The course, too-long and dense, was structured to start with Ashbury’s “City Afternoon” and its contemplation of an American sudden tragic decline and then a history of the self struggling with modern life in the poets chosen, ending with Shakespearean history and tragedy in “Lear” and “The Tempest”.

I took the Writing Center connection with the high schools into the realm of public art and became a coordinator of the course and field work of a new Center for Public Art founded by Professor Martin James and an outreach arm of the Education branch of the Council on the Environment of NYC which through work with James Madison High School was able to get support from local agencies and the Cultural Affairs Council headed then by a hard to budge brilliant aesthete, Henry Geldzahler (often depicted by David Hockney), through which we designed the renovation of Kings Highway Station, and also played a lead role in the redesign of the small park, Joyce Kilmer Square on East 15 th Street and Kings Highway, as well as doing several murals in South Brooklyn engaging art students and faculty atBrooklyn College and Madison.

In 1984 I organized about 35 CUNY lecturers to continue to press the Union and the administrators of CUNY and its colleges to improve the salaries, schedules, and job security of the rank. I was chosen to lead an ad hoc lecturer group with representatives in many CUNY

colleges. That began a struggle of fifteen years with some success as per contracts but with much bureaucratic resistance. We succeeded in gaining contracts with additional salary steps, many promotions, and making the hiring of some lecturers with a focus on teaching excellence as part of the annual hiring practices of schools and departments.

Over time, my  professor colleagues came around and voted to limit the number of courses a lecturer taught to three each semester, on parity with professors. Our chair (famously not moved by fairness) tried to eventually regress but we endured.

In the late nineties I teamed with the Executive Director of the Wolfe Institute, Robert Viscusi, to do a regular interview show on Cuny TV, *Constructing Knowledge,* we as co-Executive Producers and Bob as interviewer. We did some shows of the 30 in total with Mark Strathy as interviewer , most notably of the admired American artists, Philip Pearlstein and Lois Dodd.

I retired from Brooklyn College in about 2015, so I taught writing courses at Brooklyn all together for fifty years. I saved every paper students submitted in my classes. I still have them all now. I have also saved many files from my career dating back to at least the 1970s. Some are in my apartment and some are in storage out in Long Island.

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