

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: An Investment That Pays Off: Empowering Students for  
the Business of Peer Response

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This study investigates the theory, research, and methodology of peer response groups in the English and composition classroom and offers a method of using writing groups. It addresses the problem of the gap between theory and practice with peer response by tracing the use of writing groups back to colonial America and illustrating the overwhelming support for peer response in current and past research. Surprisingly, a large percentage of instructors still teach the traditional way with the teacher as an audience of one.

Most teachers who have tried and failed at using peer response groups report similar problems with the collaborative method. They argue that it takes too much time, yields few substantial content-based comments that can be useful for revision, and leads to noisy, chaotic classrooms. Additionally, some teachers are uncomfortable straying far from the teacher-centered, traditional method of instruction. For whatever reason, too many teachers do not allow student writers to collaborate during the writing process, and,

therefore, students often have a poor sense of audience and are inadequately prepared to collaborate on writing projects in business after they graduate. Some students also have difficulty with response groups, at least initially. They feel insecure about their own writing skills, unqualified to critique someone else's work, and afraid to hurt other people's feelings.

A method of peer response is described that is the result of a two-year study using response groups in the composition classroom. Major emphasis is placed on community-building and an initial training program. Workshops span two days with students responding at home to other members' papers on copies of the papers themselves, rather than on teacher-generated response guidelines. Class time is reserved for peer editing (day one) and discussion of the writing (day two).

This method trains students to begin the process of talking effectively about writing. It allows them time to give thought to the specific comments we expect them to make, and to note their feedback in a form that is accessible to the writer at the time of revision. Empowering students to be successful responders leads to a program where readers and writers can come together and create meaning.

AN INVESTMENT THAT PAYS OFF:  
EMPOWERING STUDENTS FOR THE BUSINESS OF PEER RESPONSE

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

Years ago, when I took high school English, students didn't usually have the opportunity to share the papers we'd written with anyone else. My papers were strictly a secret thing between my teacher and me, like a test I'd taken. I wrote what I thought my teacher wanted, and she corrected my grammar errors and handed the papers back to me. I loved to write and I remember that I often wondered what my teacher really thought about my writing. Each paper had a grade and something like "Good job!" scribbled at the top, and there were usually circles and arrows calling attention to my mistakes, but I always felt a little shortchanged. What did the teacher really think about what I'd written? Did she laugh at the ending? Did she understand the point I was trying to make at the top of page two? I also wondered how my writing stacked up against my classmates' papers. What were they writing about? How good were their papers? For the most part, I never found out.

My best friend and I used to read our papers to each other sometimes, and I shared my papers with my mom, but they both loved me and, therefore, said they loved everything I wrote. It was nice to hear praise, but as I grew older, I wanted to hear more than gushing compliments. I remember that I felt as if I were left hanging each time I wrote a paper I was excited about because I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. Writing papers in school was something like writing letters and never receiving an answer.

Research over the past twenty-five years strongly underscores the value of social exchange during the writing process. Many of the theorists in the field of composition studies, like Macrorie, Bruffee, and Murray, eagerly



the field of composition studies, like Macrorie, Bruffee, and Murray, eagerly describe the many benefits of collaborative learning, and specifically peer response. So why aren't more teachers incorporating peer response into the curriculum? Why do so many English classes resemble those I attended over thirty years ago?

It's obvious that teachers are frustrated. Although peer response sounds good on paper, many teachers have tried this teaching method only to realize disappointing results. Ask them and they'll often describe a list of reasons why they don't use peer groups anymore. I, too, had less than encouraging results with writing groups the first couple semesters I tried using them, but I quickly became captivated by the idea itself. This study grew out of those early failures when I finally realized that the fault did not lie with my students. I had just thrown them together, added an hour's worth of classroom instruction, and Voila! Effective writing groups were supposed to appear. This study, therefore, has been an attempt to research, experiment with, and design a model of peer response that incorporates community building, interpersonal relations, training, and facilitation--all the ingredients of writing groups that work.

The decision to use peer groups does not mean that the teacher must surrender complete control to students in order for groups to be productive. The optimal method allows teacher and students to share power: students are aware of educational goals from participating in a thorough initial training program, but teachers allow writing groups to be semi-autonomous to encourage honesty, openness, creativity, and real communication during small group work.

Peer response doesn't have to be a fruitless classroom exercise that takes up valuable classroom time and offers little more than another

opportunity for students to socialize. Moreover, it doesn't have to be an activity that students dread because it is embarrassing and yields little that really helps them revise their papers. Peer groups can form the foundation of our students' writing experience--a place to bring writers and readers together. Writing groups provide an audience where students can receive feedback from people they trust, a place to test their ideas and share their writing. If that feedback is honest, thoughtful, and specific, student writers should have a number of solid ideas to consider when they revise their papers. Peer groups can be a forum where young writers gain confidence in their efforts to hone their skills, discover their unique voices, and develop a critical eye toward their own writing.

Yes, peer response is time-consuming, and, no, it doesn't happen all by itself. But that doesn't mean we should give up and go back to the traditional method of teaching writing where the teacher is an audience of one. Peer groups can be a perfect place for students to gain invaluable experience learning how to communicate in small groups and to collaborate on writing projects--skills that they'll need when they take their places in the adult community.

As Karen Spear says, "response groups make sense as a way to teach writing" (Peer Response 3). If you ask my students, they'll tell you that writing groups can be a lot of fun, too.

## THE PROBLEM OF PEER RESPONSE

Since the early 1970s, composition specialists like Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, Thom Hawkins, Kenneth Bruffee, and James Moffett have praised the benefits of peer response groups in the language arts classroom.<sup>1</sup> They and many other theorists have written at length about the value of the peer audience as an addition to the more artificial audience of the teacher as grader. With peer response, students have a chance to share their prewriting ideas and what they write at all stages of the writing process with a living audience--face to face--rather than simply handing in their final papers to a teacher to be marked up and assigned a letter grade. Student writers in small writing groups can hear how other people with different points of view react to what they've written and can more fully experience the concepts of audience and purpose rather than merely reading about them. Peer response teaches students critical reading and thinking skills and affords them an opportunity to talk about language.

Peer response groups are not considered a radical technique anymore. Besides a variety of books and hundreds of journal articles written since the turn of the century, and particularly during the last thirty years, it is not uncommon to hear teachers speak about teaching writing with an emphasis on process and collaboration. However, while most English teachers teach writing with some emphasis on process and not just product, far fewer use peer response groups in their classrooms as an integral part of that process. In fact, surveys conducted fifteen years ago with high school students indicated

that most of them had never written papers for anyone but their teachers (Applebee 88-89). Even ten years ago, Anne Ruggles Gere wrote, "Writing groups may be a way of life for a certain percentage of teachers and students, but most have never experienced them" (19). There is every reason to believe that the situation has changed little, if any, in many schools.

Two years ago when I was a student teacher in a secondary school, my cooperating teacher who taught sophomore English said that she normally had little time for writing groups. I soon found out that many teachers there agreed with her. Further, at a Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE) conference in late 1996, I had an opportunity to speak with a number of high school teachers about peer response. While some instructors had used response groups in the past, few were actively using them at that time. Fewer seemed to be happy with the results they were getting. For a variety of reasons, a large number of English and composition teachers believe that writing groups may be fine theoretically and in someone else's classroom, but not something that they want to be burdened with. Indeed, the gap between theory and practice is a wide one.

#### From the Teachers' Point of View

Ask English teachers about peer response groups and you'll often get a strong reaction. While most teachers are fully aware of the impressive results of current research, many will nevertheless admit that they do not use peer response groups, although some instructors might have tried the technique in the past. Karen Spear says in her book, Sharing Writing, that although few serious teachers of writing today can remain unimpressed by the powerful potential of having students share their thoughts

and drafts, . . . in practice, . . . teachers from elementary school through college often regard group work with anything from mild reservation to outright frustration. (preface)

Some teachers have tried this technique once and subsequently dropped it from their curriculum, while others are still struggling with writing groups and feeling dissatisfied with the results. Still, "study after study shows that when response groups do 'work,' students' learning becomes richer, more exciting, and more lasting than it does under teacher-centered conditions" (preface). Since we know that peer response serves as a vital cornerstone of some writing programs, it is important to understand some of the major problems other teachers experience when they attempt to implement peer groups.

Some of the most common complaints about peer response groups center around practical issues. Many instructors feel that collaborative learning as a whole takes too much time--time for the instructor to plan adequately as well as class time to carry it out. High school teachers, especially, can feel pressured to cover a vast amount of material in a short time, and many of them don't feel they can devote one full period, much less two or more, to workshopping students' writing whenever they assign a paper. It is understandable that teachers feel pressured to keep moving at a quick pace through the textbook, particularly since some are trying to cover a set amount of material that will later appear on one standardized test or another. However, many of those teachers who feel they have no time are probably also the ones who already believe that writing groups, for the most part, are a waste of valuable time. After all, teachers are forever choosing what to cover and what to omit. Most teachers can probably find time for the things they truly believe are most beneficial for their students. After speaking

to a number of high school English teachers (including some who regularly use writing groups and others who do not), I learned that those who use peer response groups are often the same instructors who seem to place a greater emphasis on writing in general, while others might focus more on literature or grammar and merely sneak in a paper assignment or two each semester.

Spear brings up another problem that some educators have with peer response groups:

Despite decades of justification, both theoretical and applied, for the essential social dimension of writing, it's clear that the use of response groups still raises the eyebrows of principals and risks the subtle censure of colleagues because students don't look acceptably busy and classroom activities are not proceeding in orderly, familiar ways. (Peer Response 4-5)

Classroom management is an important part of teaching, but that doesn't mean that learning can take place in the classroom only when it is deathly silent. Unfortunately, to an outsider, a classroom might appear chaotic sometimes, even when the teacher is still very much in control.

Administrators might have questions, but most teachers know that noise does not necessarily mean that students are off-task. When students are involved and excited about what they're talking about, the classroom can become a bit noisy. Some teachers, however, do complain that "the classroom turns into a zoo," and students don't stay on-task when they're working in small groups. While noise obviously bothers some teachers more than it does others, it is also probable that some instructors do not have the control they should during peer response, and that students might be socializing instead of working on writing. The key to effective facilitation of peer response groups is thorough preparation.

## Is It Worth All the Trouble?

Besides the practical issues, teachers often relate that they do not believe most peer response groups help improve student writing. Student comments, they say, are usually brief and vague, or just plain wrong, and talk in most groups revolves too much around grammar and mechanical issues rather than content and organization, for example. Some say their students don't take good notes and forget much of the advice their peers do offer. Other teachers find their students spending too much time talking about the topic of a paper, and little, if any, time discussing how the author approached that topic in the essay. Most importantly, teachers have not seen that peer response has much effect on revision, so why bother?

I, too, have witnessed these problem areas and others as I've worked with response groups. I know how frustrating it can be to devote so much time to peer response, only to find the results often far short of what I had envisioned. But I have also discovered that most of the fault for the unsatisfactory outcome usually lies with my teaching. If we expect students to write more effective comments than "I liked it," "Add more details," and "Needs to be longer," then we have to show them the difference between worthless feedback and specific responses that can help a writer revise a text. Additionally, students then need to practice writing specific responses. For teachers to do less is to invite students to give back less. Show, don't just tell, then have them do. I think that is probably the best diagnosis for many of the failures with peer response. We have to invest more time to realize better results.

While some instructors have attempted to include more collaborative

activities in their curriculum, other educators have never been comfortable with this teaching method. The problem isn't just with peer response groups; it lies with a resistance by many teachers to use small group work of any kind. Newer teachers might be insecure about relinquishing any authority to students and fear losing control of the class. Other instructors, many of whom have been in the profession for years, are far more comfortable with the traditional method of teaching, what Freire calls the "'banking' concept of education," in which the teacher "makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (213). Collaborative learning means that, although the instructor is always the final authority, still, for a time, authority is shared in the classroom. The teacher is not the center of all learning, and this feeling of displacement is threatening to some instructors. Others feel that if they are not at the front and center of the classroom, they are not really teaching. If they are not the one dispensing knowledge, then the students are not really learning. Teacher-centered education has been around a long time, and old habits die hard.

At the heart of the controversy about peer response is also a debate as to whether writing is really a social activity as theorists have said. According to Kenneth Bruffee, we write so someone else can understand what we have in our minds and so we, our first reader, can understand what we have on our mind (Short Course 2). Some teachers still feel more comfortable with the traditional method of writing, where composing is done by students alone at home. Teachers also cite their own experiences writing at a computer late at night as an example of how the writer is more of a solitary figure wrestling with ideas. But we sometimes forget how often we share what we're writing with others--at all stages in the production of a text. In the past, students, too, shared their writing with parents, siblings, and friends. Writing is a way of



communicating a message--it begs to be shared. Further, virtually all writing is social, theoretically because we're building on the ideas of other people.

Moreover, some instructors resist collaboration because, to them, it feels like cheating. Karen Burke LeFevre contends that "while collaboration is more common in some areas of science, medicine, and engineering, English professors are uneasy about dealing with the issues collaborative invention raises" (124). Although many English textbooks today are co-authored, for example, there is still a stigma against it. LeFevre argues there is a "persisting suspicion that if a person were really inventive, she would be entirely self-sufficient" (124). How many of us grew up hearing "Do your own work" and "No looking at each other's papers"? Although cheating is obviously something to be taken seriously, it does not follow that we, therefore, have to be so vigilant that we never allow students to have the chance to work together or perhaps even produce a product together. While most instructors are not that extreme in their beliefs, others do believe that peer response groups produce papers that are not the students' own work. Someone else has helped the student organize and edit, and to these teachers it smells, therefore, a little like cheating. These teachers just feel better if their students are writing their papers alone at home at night.

While peer-based learning has traditionally been absent in the classroom, collaboration is the norm in business. Bruffee (1973) and Spear (1988) are among the theorists who point out what those in the private sector have long known: in business, people often do not write alone. Teams and committees brainstorm, research, draft, and edit proposals, and reports. It is usually anything but a solitary enterprise. According to Spear,

Knowing how to collaborate with peers, especially on writing projects, is perhaps the most neglected yet essential

feature of preparation for professional life. . . . Given the importance of an organization's documents, as well as the complexity of the subject matter they treat, a single author is almost never entrusted with sole responsibility either for researching or preparing a written or oral report. Writing and collaboration are, in practice, the same thing. Students, therefore, need to gain experience working and writing together in small groups. (Sharing Writing 14)

If we don't incorporate collaboration into the curriculum, we are doing our students a disservice by not fully preparing them for what they will encounter after they graduate. Peer response groups can help students develop some interpersonal skills as well as enable them to get a taste of collaborative writing.

### Mixed Feelings and Fears from Students

The problems associated with peer response groups are not limited to the above issues that have caused educators to wring their hands and retreat to the safety of the teacher-centered classroom. Students themselves must be sold on the idea of sharing what they're writing with people they have just met. While some students slip easily into their role as members of a writing group, others are reluctant or adamantly opposed to the idea.

When first faced with sharing and responding to each other's writing, most students feel self-conscious and timid. Since language is a highly personal thing, they often have doubts about their own reading and writing skills. Many fear that other students will unmercifully rip their papers apart. Students are often afraid that they'll hurt someone else's feelings, so they feel

reluctant to criticize someone else's work. Personal relationships can also get in the way at times, and there can easily be flirting and sexual attraction between group members. All of these issues can affect the responses students give, or withhold, about other students' papers.

As educators, we have to remember that, in many cases, a majority of our students are young people whose hormones are still running wild. Moreover, there will be a variety of emotions flying around in those small groups--this is the case even in the corporate world. In addition, most students will initially be feeling insecure about something--their reading, their writing, their punctuation and grammar knowledge, their analytical skills, even their appearance. The greatest service we can do for them and for the good of the writing class as a whole is to give them time and activities that will build community in the classroom. Where a history teacher might spend the first day asking students where their hometowns are, the writing teacher who hopes to use a workshop method to teach writing has to do much more. It is absolutely essential that students have time to get to know each other and that the instructor fosters a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere. Everyone should feel safe in a writing class if there is to be any chance of honesty and risk-taking in the writing and the sharing of that writing. Community-building is essential and takes time.

Another common feeling that students have about peer response is that they feel they aren't qualified to critique other people's writing. They argue: "I'm still trying to learn how to do this. How am I supposed to criticize anyone else's paper?" "I don't know what to look for." The words may vary slightly, but in the beginning the sentiments are always the same. For this reason, a well-planned training program is essential for peer response to eventually be successful. Most importantly, students need to understand

that they are responders more than critics, people responding to what they've read. All of us have experience responding to what we read; we've been doing that since we first learned to read. We need to help students gain confidence in their ability to do what we're asking of them, and instructors need to reassure them that the class will be talking more about how we respond and what constitutes good writing. Secondly, we need to offer students an opportunity to hear other people talk about writing. We need to model for them what we want them to do. Students need to be introduced to the vocabulary, and they need a chance to try responding to a "practice text" that is non-threatening.

As teachers, we also need to make students aware of what we expect from them--the "rules and regulations" of peer response groups--everything from "No put downs" to whether there will be a penalty for not showing up or not being prepared on workshop days. According to Anne-Louise Pacheco, a professor at Truckee Meadows Community College, every teacher she has spoken to who uses peer response elicits the same reaction as she does from students, i.e., when students see "peer response" on the syllabus, they don't come to class, so the teachers eventually stopped writing those two words. Further, she explains that while some teachers make participation mandatory, others made it optional (3-4). These remedies, however, do not address the reason students were not coming to class on workshop days in the first place; they are only attempts to trick students into participating. The initial training period, I believe, is the time when the instructor must show students an unwavering belief in and commitment to peer response to have any hope of good attendance. If the teacher is not 100% excited about and committed to the idea of peer response, the students will not buy into it. Further, if half the class then attends sporadically, the experience for everyone

is likely to be dismal. This is one of those times that success depends upon commitment, dedication, and attendance from a majority of the class, and the teacher's attitude has a lot to do with that. The whole thing can fall apart if too many students are not serious about peer response or if their attendance becomes sporadic. A well-planned initial training period can set everyone on the right track from the first day.

A final concern of some students pertains to tradition. Like some teachers, there are students who believe they will have difficulty learning in anything but a teacher-centered classroom. They have written for teachers for so long that they don't think they can write for other audiences. That alone speaks volumes about the need for them to do just that. The teacher is an artificial audience, and too many students focus a lot of attention on discerning just what the teacher wants and then giving it to him/her. Students need the opportunity to see how their writing communicates their message to a wider audience. In writing groups, students can experience a variety of different points of view and reactions to their papers.

Many of these same students might claim that the teacher is the only one with the right answer. They have no confidence in anything their peers might say about their writing and believe peer response is a waste of time. In fact, there are students now and then who will become hostile and claim they paid for a teacher to teach them, not a bunch of other students. But, as Bruffee explains, "No one has all the right answers, and no one's answers remain 'right' for long. In the long run, we have only each other to turn to" (Short Course 18). Students who feel inadequate to help others or who feel their classmates are inadequate to help them are unaware of the vast amount of knowledge that they possess. They need to see themselves as "knowers" and come to believe in their power to create meaning together. Training and

personal attention will be important toward winning over these students, and most of them should become believers if their small group works well together. The more vocal these students are, the more important it is to win them over early so that the atmosphere in the classroom remains a positive one. Another way to reassure them is to remind them that you, the teacher, will be available to respond to their writing, too, if they need individual help. They are not being abandoned; more people are just getting involved in the writing process. While I have had a few students begin peer response with these attitudes, I have had few who kept that attitude after the semester got underway, and none who were so vocal that the experience was compromised for the rest of the class.

So what do we do about all this? We have before us a technique for teaching writing that the leaders in the field of composition studies say holds tremendous potential for student writers. While there are some teachers who have had success with peer response groups, many other educators shy away from using them. Further, some students, too, are reluctant to participate for various reasons. But, as Karen Spear says, "response groups make sense as a way to teach writing," and I think she's right (Peer Response 3). There is little argument, however, that teaching writing with peer response groups is not an easy task, even for those who have been teaching for years. "Teachers attempting peer response groups . . . should set forth with the smallest expectations and the largest patience" (Brunjes 47). For all that our students might stand to gain, instructors should take another look at how we might make peer response a powerful, workable learning experience in the composition classroom.

When I was a graduate assistant in 1995, I tried using peer response groups when I taught my first composition classes at Emporia State

University. My results with the writing groups, however, were marginal at best. Since then, I have steadily modified the methodology, experimenting (albeit unscientifically) with different variables and procedures to make peer response a worthwhile experience for my students--a forum where the idea of audience can become real for them, and a classroom exercise that can effectively aid them in the act of revising their writing. Additionally, and very necessarily, my focus has also been on creating a classroom community and designing a training program so that students can become empowered to participate actively and effectively in these response groups. Without training, we cannot expect students to know magically how to respond to each other's writing.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the theory and methodology of peer response groups in the teaching of writing and to examine a mode for effectively using peer response in the writing classroom.

## A LOOK AT WHERE WE'VE BEEN

Teachers often think of peer response groups as a recent addition to composition pedagogy, brought to our attention by Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, or Kenneth Macrorie. But as Anne Ruggles Gere reminds us, writing groups have been around ever since people have shared what they've written with friends and colleagues (9). Regardless of the size and shape of a particular writing group, the key idea is that peer groups add a social dimension to writing.

Writing groups trace their history back to the college literary societies during this country's colonial period. Founded between the early 1700s and the late 1800s at various universities around the country, literary societies' interests were often political and/or social, and membership included the active involvement of faculty members. Most literary societies founded their own libraries out of necessity and regularly held "literary exercises" which included "orations, compositions, forensic debates, disputations, humorous dialogues, essays, [and] music/drama productions" (Gere 12). From the beginning, societies critiqued their own exercises, and the reading and critical response to each other's writing can be seen as the beginning of what we call writing groups (12). Literary societies flourished until near the end of the nineteenth century when a series of events caused literary societies to all but disappear. Among these were the inclusion of English departments on college campuses and the emergence of fraternities. Some literary societies merely changed as time went on; as composition classes at universities did not include a forum for peer response, some societies began to focus primarily



on peer response to writing. This allowed an author to read his work, which was then critiqued by others in the writing club. Eventually this methodology was adopted for use in the college classroom, although usually only in creative writing courses<sup>2</sup> (Gere 13-16).

Around 1880, writing groups began to appear in high school English classrooms. Even back then, articles began appearing in professional publications espousing the value of writing groups, including that they increased students' motivation to write and particularly to revise, helped students gain a more concrete understanding of audience, and enhanced at least some students' self-esteem. In 1919, researcher C. J. Thompson's study compared the "socialized" and "academic" methods of teaching writing and found that "students taught by the socialized method wrote with fewer mechanical errors and improved in writing skill faster than did students taught by the academic method" (Gere 17). Similarly, another researcher, Burges Johnson of Syracuse University, compared over a three year period the experimental method to the traditional method of teaching composition. His findings are in line with Thompson's in that those students using the experimental method "consistently made the most improvement in writing,"--not only the regular students but also "the backward ones; better not only as to effective presentation of the writer's ideas, but also in the elimination of 'mechanical errors' of composition" (Gere 18). Gere points out that, curiously, most of the hundreds of contemporary authors writing about peer response groups "evinced [ ] no awareness of an earlier generation of writing groups" (18).

One of the early major influences of writing groups was Dr. Fred Newton Scott, Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Michigan from 1889

to 1927. During a time when composition theory was dominated with "concern with correctness," especially as evidenced by the Harvard Reports of 1892, 1895, and 1897, Scott pointed out that the

'almost universal practice of teaching composition by pointing out to the writer the errors in his themes' wasted time and should be replaced by an attempt to unite the symbolic system of writing with students' inherent 'ideas of sociability'. (Gere 25)

Scott advocated that audience and purpose should "shape both the teaching and evaluation of writing" (25). Unfortunately, the more limiting philosophy of the Harvard group was the stronger influence on curriculum and instruction in America, and consequently, writing instruction was dominated by superficial issues of form (grammar and mechanics) rather than meaning until well into the 1930s (25).

Scott's ideas did not die, however, because he and some of the students he trained went on to write textbooks for all grade levels that supported the social view of writing and suggested the use of writing groups in the classroom. Scott's students, the textbooks they authored, and other leaders in the field of composition and rhetoric who were greatly influenced by Scott, like Leonard Sterling, George Carpenter, and Gertrude Buck, helped to keep alive the technique of using writing groups in the schools, although their successes tended to gravitate more toward elementary than secondary schools. Consequently, while writing groups did not flourish during the first half of this century, they also did not completely disappear, due to the influence and scholarship of Scott and his followers (26-28).

In the mid-1960s, the focus of English studies rapidly changed in just a few years in response to a key event. When British and American educators met at the Dartmouth Conference in 1966, American instructors discovered

that the British had very different theoretical underpinnings in English instruction. Whereas American instruction had been geared toward "Yale's tripod of language, literature, and composition," British education had been influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky and had much different goals and objectives. For British instructors,

student response was more important than close reading of literature, tentativeness more valued than precise formulation in language, and process more significant than product in writing. . . . English studies in Britain had developed a model grounded in students' personal and linguistic development. (Gere 28)

Within a couple years, English instruction in America changed dramatically, adopting many of the tenets of its British counterpart. Then in 1968, three books were published advocating writing groups--books which lit a fire under English pedagogy: James Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse, Ken Macrorie's Writing to be Read, and Donald Murray's A Writer Teaches Writing. Moffett directed his book to elementary teachers, Murray wrote for high school instructors, and Macrorie addressed teachers of college composition classes. Because of this diversity, these three authors reached a wide audience of educators.

Their choice of audience is not the only difference between these three theorists, however. Gere points out that, while Moffett advocates process writing and peer groups, he still believes that writing is basically a solo activity, and his ideas are grounded in Piaget's "asocial concept of language development" (Gere 79). "Piaget emphasizes the individual's transition from egocentrism (which puts the self at the center) to a more decentered perspective (which enables one to see from other's viewpoints)" (77).

According to Moffett, writing groups help people develop decentered speech and give student writers "feedback" similar to the response people give children who are learning to talk. Further, he maintains that students' inattention to audience is at the root of many errors in both form and content (57). He also believes that a student's independence from the teacher is crucial because "a student responds and comments to a peer more in his own terms, whereas the teacher is more likely to focus too soon on technique" (95). Moffett argues that the teacher's authority as evaluator hampers any natural relationship that might develop with student writers (193).

Contrary to Moffett, Macrorie views language and writing as more of a social experience. According to Gere, Macrorie advocates a contemporary form of social meliorism, believing that the world can be made better by human effort, in this case by "enfranchising students with the power of language" in peer response groups (21). These writing groups, he explains, contribute to the development of all students, "not only among the generality of its students but among the backward ones" (21). At the core of Macrorie's ideas is the honest language that he believes will emerge from writing groups, rather than the "feel-nothing, say-nothing language" called English (21). He contends that honest language is central to education, and that schools can foster social progress. Writing groups, or "helping circles" as Macrorie refers to them, are central to Macrorie's theory about teaching writing, in that helping circles offer students an opportunity to hear their own language and so be better able to write honestly without using phony diction (22).

In short, the theoretical underpinnings of Murray's work lie in his belief in a return to "the basics." Murray focuses on the physical layout of the classroom where students can work in writing groups and learn the activities

and especially the skills of professional writers. "The ability to write is not a gift, it is a skill," says Murray (xi). Students can learn these skills if instructors create a proper classroom setting, which he refers to as a "laboratory," and Murray believes that peer response groups are an important part of this learning environment (110).

Two other popular composition specialists who influenced composition studies in general and writing groups in particular are Peter Elbow and Kenneth Bruffee. The title of Elbow's book Writing Without Teachers (1973) suggests the theoretical underpinnings of his methodology as far as peer groups are concerned. Elbow offers only a bare minimum of guidance to student writers and prefers to allow them to devise their own strategies for commenting about each other's writing. If anything, he is more of a fellow writer than a teacher, participating in the process along with his students. This does not mean that he gives them little preparation and training. On the contrary, Elbow introduces, models, and has his students practice a variety of ways that they can respond to each other's writing, including specific and creative language they can use. In addition, he suggests a method: read aloud--silence--read aloud--oral response. In fact, Elbow's method is the one that appears to be most often used by other researchers experimenting with variables in peer response. However, Elbow does not place a number of procedural restrictions on students (i.e., timekeepers, leaders, recorders); nor does he dictate that students respond in a particular way, like requiring them to answer a list of teacher-generated questions on a separate response sheet. He prefers to share authority, giving as much of the reins to his students as possible.

While the foregoing is evidence that Elbow sees value in peer response, it would be inaccurate to color him as a theorist who completely

advocates a group approach to writing as, for instance, Bruffee does. While Elbow does use peer response groups, he also views writers in the traditional way as solitary figures:

[Writing] is a transition with yourself--lonely and frustrating--and I have wanted, in fact, to increase that transaction: help you do more business with yourself. But writing is also a transaction with other people. (Writing Without Teachers 76)

Bruffee, on the other hand, contends that "writing emerges from the 'conversation' among writers in the writing community" (Zhu 493). While composition theory has moved from a product-centered to a process-centered approach, that does not necessarily mean that virtually everyone agrees that writing should be a social act during this process. A number of theorists, as well as many textbooks authors, urge students to analyze their audiences and even peer critique, or perhaps just peer edit, each other's writing, but they stop short of wholeheartedly advocating that students work together at all stages of the writing process (as does Bruffee's Short Course in Writing).<sup>3</sup>

Another interesting and surprising difference between Elbow and Bruffee is that Bruffee tends to advocate that writing group members push toward a "consensus" of ideas, whereas, contrary to what DiPardo and Freedman say (123), Elbow does not. According to Elbow, "when we are in any class or meeting, we tend to feel that the goal is to achieve agreement. . . . The teacherless class asks you to break out of this habit. It brings out the maximum differences but it asks you not to fight things out or try to settle on the truth" (Writing Without Teachers 110-11). Elbow believes that effective peer groups should offer student writers an array of radically different ideas to consider when revising, and instructors should encourage and train students

to resist the urge to come to an agreement when they talk in their groups. The goal is for students to gather all ideas to consider at a later time when revising, not to take one final "boiled down" suggestion that everyone has settled for.

A descendant of the humanist tradition, Bruffee emphasizes the opportunity that writing groups afford for students' intellectual growth; such groups can "enhance students' mental capacities" as well as help students improve their writing (Gere 20-21). According to Bruffee, peer groups involve "students in each other's intellectual, academic, and social development ("Brooklyn Plan" 447).

Bruffee has incorporated Vygotsky's theory that language is social in nature. Vygotsky claims that "development in thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual" (20). Bruffee explains that there is a close relationship between thought, writing, and speaking:

If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internal conversation, then writing is internal conversation re-externalized. . . . We converse; we internalize conversation as a thought; and then by writing we re-immense conversation in its extensive social medium. ("Conversation of Mankind" 641)

Students internalize the responses from their peers that they hear in their writing groups, and those comments later appear in their writing. Gere explains that student writers in response groups "become both writer and audience, incorporating the 'otherness' of the audience into their own writing" (84). Students who do not have the experience of participating in

writing groups miss out on this metalanguage and the experience of a dialogue that unites writer and audience in a future text.

### A Survey of Recent Research

In addition to the above studies of leaders in the field of composition, the following is a brief survey of some of the more recent research in the area of collaborative peer writing groups. These researchers look into the areas of training, gender, and method.

Training issues connected with peer response are a popular topic of research in the 1990s. Among the researchers who have conducted recent studies about training are Wei Zhu (1995), Gloria Neubert and Sally McNelis (1990), Anne-Louise Pacheco (1994), and Tim Hacker (1994). Zhu has studied the effects of training on the quantity and quality of feedback generated during response sessions and concludes that training has a significant impact on both the quantity and quality of students' comments. His results also show that group discussions are "livelier." According to Zhu, "The emphasis on global concerns of writing and on specific feedback during training helped students provide more effective feedback on one another's writing" (516). Pacheco writes about the importance of both preparation by the teacher and thorough training of the students, including what procedures students are supposed to follow and specific areas they should focus on. She also models how to talk about writing. Neubert and McNelis focus on the area of training students to make specific, concrete responses and suggestions that will be helpful to group members when they revise. They describe training activities that they found to be highly successful in reducing the percentage of vague, worthless responses. Lastly, Hacker has experimented with and obtained positive



results from modeling how to talk about writing during one-on-one conferences with students.

Besides training issues, a variety of researchers, including Elizabeth Sommers (1992), (1993), (1994) and Sommers and Sandra Lawrence (a collaborative project in 1992), have conducted studies regarding the relationship between gender and peer response groups, a particularly controversial topic in recent years. Among the findings by these women are that instructors need to address the power issues that thrive in peer response groups. Sommers describes various choices teachers must make when they prepare to use writing groups and emphasizes that instructors need to find ways to empower all students, male and female. Further, Sommers has studied the difference between men's talk and women's talk in peer groups. She discusses occasions when females might participate less, be overpowered by interruptions by the males, or be overly polite, for example, and claims that learning how to facilitate writing groups in a way that addresses gender issues "is one of the most important things we can do as writing teachers" ("Peer Groups" 15). Finally, Sommers has studied the way students in response groups communicate in the ways that they have been socialized to communicate. She advises that "both males and females need to go beyond prescribed gender roles and social roles" and suggests some specific ways that teachers can help all students in writing groups ("Women Collaborators" 1). Sommers' and Lawrence's collaborative research centers on observing students' talk in "teacher-directed" and "student-directed" peer response groups.

Other notable research includes Peter Smagorinsky's often cited study, "The Aware Audience: Role-Playing Peer-Response Groups" (1991), which looks at the concept of audience. He suggests that one way students can gain a

better understanding of the particular characteristics of specific audiences is by participating in role-play activities in the classroom. Sandra Teichmann (1992) discusses an experimental method she tried using not only peer response but also peer grading of portfolios at the end of the semester. Nancy Montgomery (1992) observed the activities of several teachers during writing workshops and advises that teachers must plan thoroughly for workshops, especially in the areas of "student sharing; mirroring; discussing strengths, weaknesses and form; and making suggestions" (1). Helen Harris (1992) offers another, albeit unusual, idea for writing workshops. She conducts them only once during each semester for about six weeks, during which time the class devotes entire class periods to responding to a single student's essay, until everyone has had an opportunity to sit in the author's chair. Lastly, Mara Holt (1992) gives us a method of conducting peer response that blends exercises and activities from both Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's book, Sharing and Responding, and Bruffee's A Short Course in Writing.

### Further Research

Except for an extremely small number of negative articles (Newkirk 1984 and Berkenkotter 1984), research overwhelmingly supports the value of using peer response groups in the teaching of writing, as long as there is thorough teacher preparation and student training. To help educators who are interested in trying response groups in their classrooms, I've added the listing below of additional research organized around some of the benefits educators, researchers, and theorists have found with this teaching method.

Peer response groups help students:

1. Improve their writing; expose students to a variety of styles and techniques (Nystrand 1986, Spear 1988, Crowhurst 1979, Caulk 1994);
2. Experience the interaction between reader and writer (Bruffee 1985, Gere 1987);
3. Increase critical thinking and reading skills, including high level cognitive skills like summarizing, interpreting, and clarifying (Lagana 1973, Crowhurst 1979, Legge 1980, Spear 1988);
4. Feel less apprehension and alienation; more joy, confidence, trust, and comfort; and an increase in self-esteem (Legge 1980, Sharan and Sharan 1976, White 1995, Bruffee 1985, Fox 1980);
5. Be more motivated to write and revise, as well as increase the amount and quality of the revision (Crowhurst 1979, Nystrand 1986, White 1995, Benson 1979);
6. Develop a better sense of audience (Macrorie 1976, Freedman 1985, White 1995, Legge 1980, Gere and Abbott 1985, Crowhurst 1979);
7. Become better critics of their own writing (Barron 1991, Smagorinsky 1991, White 1995, Bruffee 1985);
8. Catch "weak repetitions, bad word choices, and grammar errors" (when they read aloud) (Macrorie 1984);
9. Learn best because they are actively participating in their own learning (Spear 1988, Legge 1980, Hawkins 1976);
10. Get past writer's block (Rose 1980);

11. Get prompt, varied, useful feedback to their writing (Legge 1980, Crowhurst 1979);
12. Get responses that are more focused, specific, and related to the text than are many responses from teachers (N. Sommers 1982, Freedman 1985, Gere and Stevens 1985);
13. Learn to communicate in group settings; also helps prepare them to collaborate later in business (Spear 1988); and
14. Make "greater gains in peer editing and theme composition" (Wayne 1973).

History shows us that writing groups have been around for a long time, and that it is natural for writers to want to share what they've written with others. We see this all the time with professional writers who depend on feedback from colleagues, editors, family, and friends. Research also overwhelmingly supports the value of peer response in the teaching of writing. It's time for more teachers to rethink the peer response process and its possibilities in the English and composition classrooms and try again to offer students an experience with audience that they need to learn to write effectively.

IMPLEMENTING THE PEER RESPONSE PROCESS:  
RESULTS OF A TWO-YEAR STUDY

In my composition classes, writing groups are not something students dread, nor are they merely an opportunity for students to socialize. Peer response is not an empty exercise that yields little more than vague comments. On the contrary, writing groups are the heart of the writing process, a place where readers and writers can come together and not only communicate and experience different points of view but also create meaning at the same time.

This is not to say that the peer response process that I use in my classroom is flawless. I doubt there is such a thing. Teachers know only too well that what works one semester may fail the following term with different students, especially when an instructor is dealing with a method as unpredictable as peer response. I still face problems with writing groups all the time; however, I also see many successes which make all the time and effort worthwhile.

Unfortunately, we've seen that, although research overwhelmingly supports peer response groups, many teachers who try this technique, nevertheless, soon abandon it and return to traditional methods of teaching writing. I do not pretend to be better than veteran instructors, only perhaps more stubborn than some in that I simply refused to give up when my initial attempts at using peer response produced dismal results. I've been a member of several productive writing groups over the years and have also served on many committees in business whose assignment it was to write a manual,

proposal, or a report. Writing is naturally a social process, and collaborative writing in business is an everyday event. Consequently, I agree with Karen Spear that teaching writing with peer response makes sense; moreover, our students had better have some experience working and writing in groups if they someday want to be competitive in the marketplace.

The peer response process I'm currently using is the latest modification in a string of attempts over two years. Along the way, I have experimented with many variables, including (1) training, (2) group size and makeup, (3) length of workshops, (4) use and design of response sheets, (5) whether papers are read aloud or silently, (6) the amount of structure placed on groups, (7) where students write their comments, and (8) how comments are given to the author (orally or written). I regularly solicit feedback from my students, and occasionally from my colleagues as well, about their experiences with peer response. While I will always be open to modifying the process to improve the experience and results for my students, the method I am presently using has yielded some exciting results, both the kind you see on paper and the ones you see on faces. On the whole, most of my students love their writing groups and have become fiercely loyal to them. They would not think of submitting a paper to me without first trying out the idea and the text in their small groups. They tell me that sharing what they've written makes writing less painful, even enjoyable. If peer response helps them keep writing, then we've won a very important battle.

### Training

According to Ronald Barron, "the critical factor in determining the success or failure of [peer response] is what happens before students get into

groups to read each other's papers" (24). Most researchers agree with Barron and contend that the lack of effective training (or any training at all) is the most prevalent reason for failure with peer response groups. Although we're good at telling students to "show-don't-tell," we will, nevertheless, sometimes try to explain quickly a complicated process like peer response just minutes before students share their papers in their writing groups. Why then are we surprised when students are confused, when their comments are shallow or focused only on mechanics and spelling, or when they don't take the activity seriously and merely sit in their groups and socialize? I realize that it's difficult to devote a week or two to peer response training, particularly when many teachers feel they are already pressured to cover too much material in too short a time; nevertheless, a true commitment to peer response means that we have to allow for the time it takes for students to be trained adequately. Otherwise, why try the method at all?

The first time I tried using writing groups in my classroom over two years ago, I was one of those instructors who spent only an hour explaining how the process would work before I expected them to participate in their first peer group. The result was disastrous. By the time we met again two days later for the workshop, students needed everything explained again. Additionally, students' comments were often vague, overly complimentary, and too focused on matters of form rather than content. My lack of organization also inadvertently showed students that I was not serious about writing groups, and the students were, consequently, continually off-task and socializing. The subject of training then quickly became a major focus for me as I modified peer response over the ensuing months. Students must have time to study peer response techniques, and then they need an opportunity to practice what they've learned.

## Community-Building

Before the actual skills-based lessons begin, the teacher must work on fostering a safe, non-threatening atmosphere in the classroom. From the first day, it is imperative that students have various opportunities to get together and get to know each other, both as a class and in their writing groups. Sharing writing necessitates a certain level of trust if we expect any honest communication to take place. Shaving time off this stage of community-building will sabotage later efforts to realize effective writing groups.

First of all, it is important for both the teacher and the students to learn quickly each other's names. I begin by playing a name game with students sitting in large circles of about ten people each. The first person says his/her name with an adjective that begins with the same letter as the name, like "singing Sandra." The next person must say "singing Sandra" plus his/her own name and adjective, like "bicycle Bill." Proceeding around the circle, each person must say all the name-pairs that came before and then add his/her own. I find that students are always surprised by how quickly they can memorize many names with this game. Next, I ask students to write their own names on post-it notes and affix them to the front of their desks for a week or two. Finally, I often read off everyone's name and have students tell the class their hometown and perhaps their favorite food.

The next task that needs to be done is dividing the class into writing groups. After students have written a diagnostic assignment, I quickly review the papers to get a general idea of each student's writing skill and divide the class into groups of 4-5 students each. I believe this group size works best because I want students to receive feedback to their writing from at least three other students of varying abilities. It is also important to make groups large



enough to accommodate students' periodic absences. Just a few absences on the day of a workshop can throw the class into chaos if groups are constructed too small originally. The teacher then needs to help these groups quickly begin to become cohesive teams. I like to give them a puzzle or a game where groups compete against each other to start group members interacting with each other (see appendix A).

At this point, the teacher can begin more skills-based training, knowing that any activities done in small groups will further help students to become better acquainted. Among the major areas that students should receive some training in are (1) giving appropriate and effective feedback, (2) understanding proper group etiquette, and (3) practicing the response process. Teaching students how to talk about language and what to look for in a text takes time. These are ongoing lessons, so teachers should not expect proficiency after a week or two. However, students can become familiar with the way we talk about writing by watching the teacher model appropriate responses and by practicing working with texts themselves.

It is a good idea to begin by modeling peer response during a whole-class response session in which students' desks are arranged in a circle. Teachers should find a couple essays from past students about topics of general interest to the class and make a copy for each student. (Published essays usually don't work as well as student-generated texts because students will have more difficulty finding things to comment on.) The teacher then slowly reads the paper aloud while students follow on their copies, allowing a minute of silence to pass before reading it a second time. During the second reading, students should make notes on their copies. The teacher can then direct the response session by both modeling effective comments as well as reinforcing appropriate comments from students.

The second essay can be used in a variation of the above activity. The teacher prepares a list of sentences that direct selected students to adopt specific personas, i.e., "You are a very outgoing person, but you dominate the conversation too much and don't allow other people to share their ideas" and "You focus too much on grammar and punctuation rather than on content issues like organization, meaning, purpose, and tone" (see appendix A). These sentences are then cut into individual strips and handed out (secretly if possible) to selected students with the directions that they should comment on the next essay in the persona described on the slip of paper. This time the practice response session usually becomes funny after awhile as students realize that something is going on, and the activity becomes a perfect opportunity to discuss group rules/etiquette. It is important that all students understand that (1) no "put downs" are allowed; (2) students should be honest yet tactful (and humble since no one is an expert); (3) no one should completely dominate the group--everyone should be given a chance to speak; (4) the group should not try to reach a consensus, but should strive to offer the greatest range of opinions and suggestions; (5) no one should feel obligated to change anything in a paper--students retain ownership of their own writing; and (6) the author should not argue and get defensive or take criticism personally; the author's job is to gather all responses to consider later at the time of revision. Most students have participated in small groups in the past and will willingly share personal experiences of various problems. Discussing group etiquette in the beginning of a semester makes it far easier for students to bring it up later in a group should a problem arise.

After the class has had an opportunity to participate in a couple practice response sessions, another important training exercise that teachers should include is an activity to help students recognize and formulate comments

about writing that are specific and helpful for revision, rather than vague and worthless. Before training, it is common for students to respond to a text with comments like "I think you need more detail," "It needs to be longer," "Great! I liked it," or "I got confused in a lot of places." Using an overhead projector, the teacher can review a list of comments with students and have them decide which comments would be helpful to them when they revise their papers. Students should eventually realize that comments must be specific to be helpful--authors need to know what and where so they can later check their papers and rethink the suggestions when they revise. I tell students to remember my Golden Rule of Peer Response--give unto others the kind of comments that you would like to receive. Everyone wants to receive responses that are specific enough to help them improve their papers, so those are the kind of responses they should give to others. After students review the teacher's list of comments on the overhead, they can be directed to work in their groups to rewrite a list of vague comments so that they are more specific and useful.

### The Response Process

The final activity that I include during this initial training period is an opportunity for students to practice participating in the response process itself, before they respond as a group to a major paper. Students in my classes are usually assigned to write a 1-2 page paper about a horrible, funny, or significant experience they once had with writing, or a paper about something they'd like to be better at (singing, time management, playing tennis, taking tests, and parenting.). Sharing papers on topics like these not only gives students a text to talk about during this "rehearsal" but also helps students get

to know a little more about each other. Papers must be typed and students should bring an original and four copies to the next class meeting.

At this point, if not earlier when reviewing the course syllabus, teachers should inform students about the penalty for missing class on workshop days. They need to understand how important their attendance is everyday, but particularly on workshop days. If students miss a workshop day, it directly affects not only themselves but also the students in their groups. There is no way to make up the missed activity. Therefore, I have a policy that students with unexcused absences on a workshop day will have their final grade for that particular paper penalized one full letter grade. Although that might sound overly harsh to some teachers and students, I have heard various colleagues relate what happens when a lenient absentee policy is in place. Few things can sabotage rough draft workshops quicker than high absenteeism. When students repeatedly don't show up, their group members quickly become resentful and any trust and camaraderie that might have been started will be gone. A student's absence directly affects several other students, and, therefore, it cannot be acceptable (without good reason). My experience is that students appreciate the tough policy because they can then depend on good attendance from their group members. If peer response is going well, most students look forward to the workshops, and absenteeism is not a problem anyway.

The response process (or rough draft workshop) that students will be participating in sounds a bit complicated initially, so it is all the more important that they have the opportunity to do a run-through during training. As with most areas pertaining to peer response, there is no one right way to design the workshop process, but I have found that I see the best results with a two-day workshop. Many theorists report that they obtain good

results with Peter Elbow's one-day method that instructs students to read their papers aloud twice and then have peers orally comment on them, as we do in my classes with whole-class peer response during training. While I wholeheartedly see value in reading aloud and, consequently, have my students incorporate it into the workshops when their papers are very short, I've had little success with immediate oral responses. When I tried using immediate oral response, comments have tended to be fewer in number, and too vague and complimentary to be of much use to the author. Moreover, I found that even when comments were specific and helpful, the author often did a poor job of making notes about the feedback. Therefore, many of the responses were lost anyway. No matter how many times I reminded students about note taking, they would still get caught up in listening to what their classmates said and would forget to write down many of the responses.

The idea to move away from Elbow's model came one evening when I was participating in a writing group to which I belonged. I had not had the opportunity to read and think about the assigned text beforehand because I had been out of town. For most of the evening, I found myself unable to offer much feedback other than expounding on what other group members brought up. It was an eye opening experience for me when I suddenly realized that I was expecting my students to do what I could not--give immediate thoughtful, specific feedback on the spot. I changed peer response the following day to a two-day process that allowed students to have time at home to read the papers slowly and take their time giving the best, most useful, comments they could. I have never been sorry for that decision.

## Day One: Peer Editing

As for the details of this two-day workshop, students bring their typed copies of their drafts to class on the first day and place all but one copy under their desks. This copy is marked "Grammar Copy" and is passed around the group circle for peer editing. On this day, students limit themselves to comments about grammar, mechanics, and spelling, and all group members will make their comments about a particular person's paper on that one copy. I tell my classes that I do not expect, nor do I want, the classroom to be strictly quiet on peer editing day. I've found that students seem to enjoy the activity more if they can feel free to ask other students about grammar and spelling rules. I always seem to find myself involved in a discussion about commas, semicolons, quotation marks, or apostrophes.

Some students will be reluctant initially to participate in peer editing because they are embarrassed by their lack of skill in these areas, so it is very important that teachers stress that students don't have to be right. It is the author's job to check and correct the errors on his/her paper. The responder's role is only to draw the author's attention to possible errors; therefore, I suggest to my students that they use question marks, i.e., placing "sp?" by a word they think might be misspelled. Although students will inevitably be looking up various things in handbooks and dictionaries, I tell them that they are still not to correct any errors or to rewrite sentences. They are just to mark the error as described above. Near the end of class, the grammar copies are returned to the authors, and students distribute the remaining clean copies of their papers to their group members to take home.

I realize that doing peer editing on the first day of the workshop sounds like a backward idea when theorists across the board see editing as the final

step in the writing process. I arrived at the idea when I had difficulty figuring out what to do in class the day students came to distribute copies of their papers. I didn't like the idea of beginning anything new, and students' minds were obviously on their papers. Although I agree in theory with the experts, I have, nevertheless, found that conducting peer editing on the first day yields some surprising results. Most importantly, students are no longer focusing on matters of form when they discuss their papers on the second workshop day, since they have already edited the papers. This has always been a big problem during peer response for the experts as well as for my colleagues and me. When I conducted a small survey of other graduate teaching assistants at Emporia State University in May 1996, seven out of eight of them said that one of the biggest problems they had with peer response was that students' comments focused far too much on grammar and mechanics. After I changed my method, that problem virtually disappeared overnight in my classes.

Critics might also say that it is a waste of time to edit before revising because the words and sentences that students correct might not even appear in the paper after revision. While that is definitely true of more accomplished writers, I have not found it to be true of student writers. Unfortunately, much of a student writer's rough draft is still in the paper after revision. Individual words might be changed here and there and paragraphs might be moved around, but the greatest change to a student's rough draft is often that more text is added because the rough draft was far too short. Consequently, students probably will have to edit their papers a second time to catch all the surface errors, although I see that as a small price to pay and also good practice for student writers.

## The Question of Peer Response Guides

Another major change that I have made in the last year with peer response is that I have stopped distributing peer response guidelines to students to fill out for each paper they read. I realize that many theorists and instructors still advocate using response sheets, but I came to realize eventually that the problems associated with them greatly outweighed the advantages. Students hated filling them out, for one thing, especially because they were time-consuming. Some felt like they were like reading tests, while others complained that the guides were "stupid worksheets" that didn't help them when they revised their papers. From reviewing the response sheets, I often found that students were limiting themselves to the questions on the sheets, which was quite a disappointing discovery. Most importantly, however, I realized that response sheets didn't help students revise their papers as I had assumed they would. Students were reluctant to wade through all the questions to find problems and suggestions from their peers that they could use and, therefore, often didn't even read the response sheets. Students' time is valuable, and if I expected them to use their peers' comments when they revised their papers, those comments needed to be more accessible. In my own writing group, we wrote our comments directly on the copy of the text at the place where the comment applied. When I remembered that, it became the obvious thing to do with my composition students.

I still believe, however, that students need to be reminded about the things we have been discussing recently in class pertaining to the particular paper they have just written, so I make a list of these items on the board for students to copy. Students are then instructed to use the list as a reminder of



some of the areas they can focus on and simply to read the list before they comment on their peers' papers. They are expressly directed not to use the list in any way as a response sheet. All comments about a paper are to be written on the paper itself in the margin at the point where the comment applies. Students can also write an endnote if they wish, but an endnote cannot replace margin comments.

### Day Two: Talking About Writing

When students bring back the essay copies the following class, the entire hour is devoted to discussion of the papers. I give some guidelines to students during training, but then I allow each group to decide how it wants to organize the discussion. I suggest that the author be the first person to speak about the paper, and that he/she should bring some specific questions to ask of the group. Additionally, I suggest that, as the discussion moves along, the author make notes of new ideas that arise and be assertive enough to ask the questions and get the answers he/she needs to revise. It is up to the group to decide, for example, whether to choose a timekeeper to be assured that all papers are discussed. They also choose whether each group member will take a turn voicing a reaction to the paper or whether students will speak whenever they want to as the discussion proceeds through each essay.

### Conclusions

The results of my attention to and ongoing modification of the response process have been very positive to say the least. As noted earlier, students look forward to spending time in their writing groups and depend

upon them at various stages of the writing process, particularly when they are looking for topic ideas and sharing rough drafts. I also believe that, although many of them are still writing "reader-based" papers, they do have a greater sense of audience than they did before.

Additionally, I believe students are revising more because they are receiving more useful, specific comments to consider. Where I used to see many brief, vague, worthless comments like "need more details," now I see specific, useful comments on papers, like the ones made by Angie, a freshman in my Spring 1996 class on a classmate's paper advocating capital punishment (see appendix B). Instead of focusing merely on shallow details or matters of form, Angie asks perceptive questions about morality ("Isn't this immoral?" "Wouldn't this lead to more innocent suspects dying?") and for evidence to back up the author's argument ("Who said this and why should we care who he is? Is he credible?" and "Knowing this guy makes you seem more of an 'expert' on murderers. Take advantage of this. Flaunt your knowledge!") Another comment shows Angie is aware of tone ("You say 'you' a lot--it feels like you're pointing your finger at me and saying I'm a killer").

Finally, I sincerely believe my students' writing is improving. They are trying harder because they want to be proud of what they bring to the group of their peers. They are also developing a more critical eye toward their own writing from the practice of reviewing other people's papers. I remember hearing a student say that she found herself automatically going back over her paper looking at all her transitions after she had begun to comment on transitions in other people's papers. I also see students trying out new techniques and styles that they've liked in other people's papers, which can only help them stretch as young writers. Perhaps they are improving, too, because we generally do better at things we enjoy. My

experience is that more of my students enjoy writing when they don't feel it is something they must struggle with all alone. Adding other voices to the task has changed the solitary figure to a community of writers--and that has made all the difference.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Kenneth Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," College English, 34 (February 1973), 634-43; Thom Hawkins, Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing (Urbana, IL: ERIC/NCTE, 1976); Peter Elbow, Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process (New York: Oxford UP, 1981); James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Among the colleges whose instructors brought writing groups into regular composition classes were Amherst, Yale, MIT, the University of Pennsylvania, Middlebury College, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Michigan (Gere 16-17).

<sup>3</sup> Over time, some theorists like Janet Emig and Linda Flower seem to have changed their philosophy of language development from one in line with Piaget's theory (asocial) to one based on Vygotsky's ideas (social). Likewise, their views about writing groups seem to have changed. See Emig (1971) and (1979) and Flower (1977) and (1979).

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## Appendix A:

### Materials for Peer Response Training Activities

A.1. Puzzle Race

A.2. Role Play

### A.1. Puzzle Race

Group members are each given an envelope with three puzzle pieces inside. No one may speak during the game. No one may ask (or in any way signal) another person for a particular puzzle piece. Anyone may, however, at any time give pieces to other group members. The object of the game is for each group member to have a completed three-piece, six-inch square puzzle in from of him/her. The first group to complete the task wins.

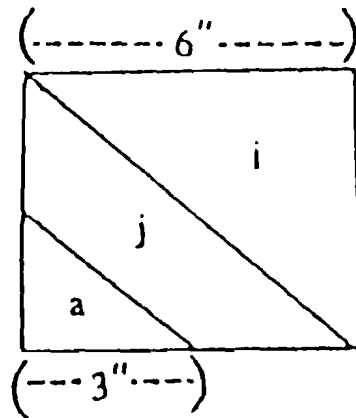
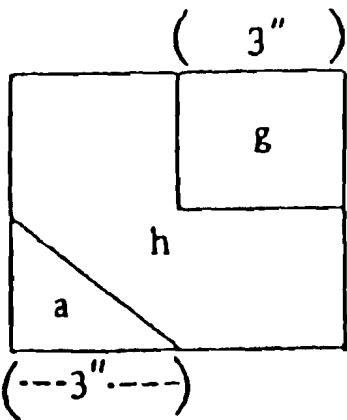
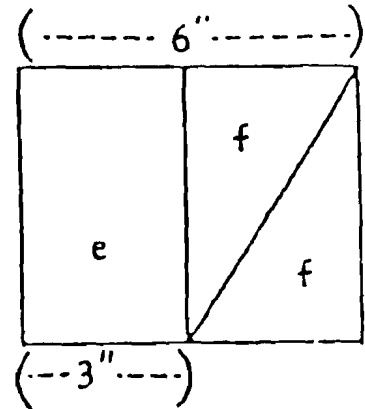
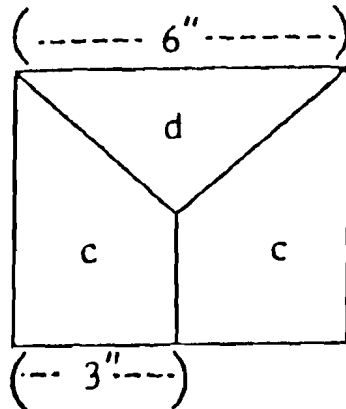
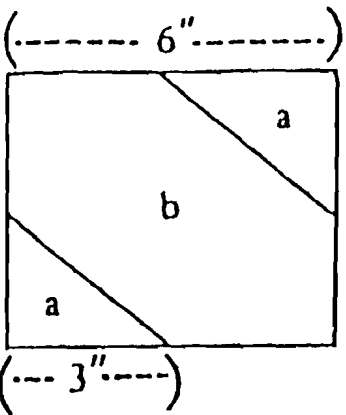
After the game, group members and the class as a whole can share what took place in the groups, how individuals acted, what the problems were, what they discovered about themselves and others, etc.

The number of puzzles on the following page is designed for a group of five, but can easily be adapted for groups of four. After drawing and cutting out the pieces of the puzzles, distribute them into five envelopes as follows:

Envelope	A:	i, h, e
	B:	a, a, a, c
	C:	a, j
	D:	d, f
	E:	g, b, f, c

This game is based on an exercise in "Communication Pattern in Task-Oriented Groups" by Alex Bevalos in Group Dynamics: Research and Theory 3rd ed. by Dorwin Cartwright. New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

Design for puzzles for the Puzzle Race group activity



## A.2. Role Play Activity for Peer Response Training

Cut the following sentences into strips. Give them to selected students, without the rest of the class knowing what you will be doing if possible (you may want to meet with these students before class). Choose someone to be the author of the essay and be sure the first strip is given to him/her. Ask these selected students to participate in the upcoming response session following the directions on their slips of paper. After all students have read the essay, conduct the whole-class peer response practice session. After a while, students will probably realize that something strange is going on, and you can direct the discussion to proper etiquette and interpersonal communication in peer response groups.

You are someone who has a hard time separating yourself from what you write. You take every criticism or suggestion personally. You get defensive or argue with other group members.

You are a person who may have great suggestions for the writer, but you constantly interrupt others who are speaking to give your opinion.

You often waste time by joking around or talking about what you did or are going to do on the weekend.

Your responses are too vague. They lack the specificity to really be helpful to the writer when he/she revises the paper (for example: "The paper is great." "The second paragraph needs to be longer." etc.)

You are a very outgoing person, but you dominate the conversation too much and don't let other people share their ideas.

You are too afraid to hurt the writer's feelings, so you always say that various elements of the paper are good, even if they need a lot of work.

You have good suggestions, but you offer your opinions as if they were facts. You are too tactless and tend to slam the writer.

You focus only on grammar and punctuation rather than on content issues like organization, purpose, meaning, evidence, tone, etc.

## Appendix B:

### Example of Peer Response Comments

#### B.1. Angie

B.1. Angie

The Death Penalty

(Is It Justified?)

Need more of an introduction.  
Exp: Real life story or statistic

The death penalty is very important to our nations well-being. We need a harsh justice for harsh crimes I believe that if you take a life then you should have to give up your life in return.

① If you take a life I believe that you should have to forfeit your life. When you kill somebody you do not deserve to live. Killing somebody is the worst crime you can commit, Therefore, you should receive the worst punishment possible. Living in a state prison for life with TV, weightlifting, equipment visitation rights, and maybe parole for good behavior. If they get parole then more than likely they will repeat their crimes.

→ repetitive

Does this sound like a punishment that is fit for a killer. I think not.

→ not all places  
can you back this up

② Ernest vanden Haag said "The threat of death may deter criminals more than life in prison. It is a mistake to regard the death penalty as though it were of the same kind as other penalties. If it is not, then diminishing returns are unlikely to apply. And death differs significantly, in kind from any other penalty. Life in prison is still life, however unpleasant, it threatens to take life altogether." A study done found that 99% of inmates on death row would prefer life in prison than execution.

③ <sup>Besides that, (or another transition)</sup> The cost of keeping prisoners in prison for life the way the prison system is set up now costs at least \$500,000 compared to the cost of putting a prisoner on death row which costs approxmatly \$1,000,000. That is way to expensive, I think that if we went to methods involving a gun, hanging, or be heading then it would become cheaper to put murderers on death row. If we restricted the numbers of appeals that inmates on death row could have then the process would become more efficient and cheaper. We would

you say you feel a lot - like pointing a finger at a killer

Need transition thesis statement

Isn't this immoral?

↓  
Wouldn't this lead to more innocent suspects dying?

not have death row inmates on death row for 10 to 15 years. <sup>Instead they</sup> they might only be in death row for only one to two years. That would cut costs dramatically.

Every year <sup>an average of</sup> 14,000 people are convicted of murder. <sup>of these,</sup> Only 250 are sentenced to death. That leads to severe over crowding in the prisons, so we the tax payers would have to pay more taxes to build more prisons.

In the United States only 38 states have the death penalty, 12 don't. The reason I think we do not have as many executions as we should is because people don't want to feel bad or guilty about their decision. "You do not have to like the death penalty in order to support it any more than one must like radical surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy in order to find it necessary that these attempts are at curing cancer." The problem with murder and the death penalty is it will get worse before it gets better. We will have to prove to criminals and those who will commit murder that we are serious about the death penalty and they will receive the penalty.

When I go to visit my grandparents in a small town just a short 35 miles north of Topeka I think that they are strange because at night they do not lock their doors, but in real life I wish that Topeka or even Emporia was like that. Just this last weekend somebody left their room unlocked for only 15 minutes and a stranger stole 30 CD's.

Nobody was killed but the intruder could of just as easily hid in her room and waited for her to come back to rape or kill her. "The study done by M.I.T. showed that in 1970 homicide rates that a person who lived in a large American city had a greater chance of getting murdered than being killed in battle in W.W.II." - don't need quotes, just say it!

Do not get me wrong I know that the prisoners that we sentenced to death are people and some of them might be innocent or they might be able to be rehabilitated. I know this because I worked with a guy who killed another human being, went to prison and was rehablited. He is almost a model citizen but I still think that the death penalty is needed to control the rates of crimes in the United States.

Knowing this guy makes you seem more of an "expert" on murderers take advantage of this Flaunt your knowledge

How this paragraph you need a topic sentence + transition

is this a part of your conclusion

need topic sentence + transition

Who said this and why should we care who he is? Is he credible?

don't need quotes, just say it!

Why?



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Signature of Author Janet Cook

Date July 29, 1997

An Investment that Pays Off:  
Empowering Students for the Business  
of Peer Response

Title of Thesis

Way Cooper  
Signature of Graduate Office Staff Member

Date Received July 30, 1997