

More and more I teach by writing in public. I have even, when invited to do a "reading," responded by offering to do a "writing." This, in part, brings the beginner's terror back to my teaching and keeps me from being bored by the sound of my own voice. But I think it does something more than that. Both writing and reading are essentially private acts, but if we are to teach them we must find ways to make them public.

When I face the blackboard to write in public I do not know what I will hear myself say. I recreate the experience of the blank page. I write to find out what I will write. It does not matter whether I write badly or well. Mistakes can be more productive and instructive than writing without mistakes. On my page alone I often see a breakdown in syntax at the point of a breakthrough in meaning. I am not looking, however, for correctness or incorrectness; I am looking for what Maxine Kumin calls, "the informing material." I am listening for voice; I am seeking the hint of an order.

And then, another time, I am working in public to make a text come clear. I cut, I add, I reorder. I follow the conventions of language, or I ignore them, if that is what I have to do to make the meaning clear. My students share their search for meaning with me. We teach each other by learning.

We read a text together, following false scents, racing down trails that suddenly stop, losing our bearings, helping each other find meaning in the prose and sharing with the writer, who may be teacher or may be student, the many ways that meaning may be found in a text and made clear.

I no longer know what I will teach or what I will learn in a class, or from a class. I am never sure, in fact, what has been learned. But I do know that learning is taking place, for I am learning, and my students are learning, and we are revealing our learning to each other.

Wendy Bishop

Helping Peer Writing Groups Succeed

Imagine you are entering a freshman level composition classroom. It is the tenth week of a fifteen-week semester. The teacher sits to one side of the room, conferencing with a single student about the student's paper which rests on a table between them. The rest of the twenty-student class has been divided into peer writing groups of four to five students. The class is noisy, for each group is busy discussing a paper and students talk freely, offering revision suggestions. The writer and a group historian note these suggestions, and a group monitor moves the discussion on, seeing to it that the group reviews at least some of each member's writing before the one hour class is over.

After the teacher conferences with several students, she then moves for a time from group to group, offering additional suggestions and encouragement, and checking on work accomplished. A few minutes before the class ends, the groups briefly summarize their work and each discussion is transcribed into written notes by the group historian. Finally, the teacher checks to make sure that the class as a whole is clear about future class sessions and/or assignments.

I have just described an idealized but obtainable writing classroom, one in which students join together in collaborative work and develop their writing abilities in a non-threatening environment. The teacher is guide and assistant to the work at hand. This holistic approach to writing and the teaching of writing makes many new demands on both students and teachers who need to change their attitudes and expectations to participate in such a classroom. Because of these sometimes unexpected demands, teachers trying to introduce peer writing groups into their curriculum often feel let down by a method that has been presented in glowing terms yet can prove problematic in practice. Has group work been overrated? Have teachers been deceived? Or, have teachers become confused by the apparent simplicity of a rather complex teaching method?

I would like to explore these questions by reviewing research that discusses the use of peer writing groups, by profiling successful and unsuccessful peer writing groups and, finally, by offering a plan for preparing and training students for the method. Such a plan must also include guidelines for evaluating the effectiveness of peer writing groups in the composition classroom.

RESEARCH ON PEER WRITING GROUPS

The value of using peer writing groups as a teaching method, if not over-rated, has sometimes been oversimplified. A brief review of current research and practice shows this. In general, collaborative peer writing groups do benefit the student. The claims for the efficacy of the method are many and various. Mary Beaven, discussing peer evaluation, claims that the collaborative method allows students to develop audience awareness, to check their perceptions of reality, to strengthen their interpersonal skills, and to take risks; the entire process results in improvement in writing and students' ability to revise. Thom Hawkins agrees that students strengthen their interpersonal skills and risk-taking or creative abilities.

Kenneth Bruffee found that peer tutors and tutees at work in a collaborative environment deal with higher order concerns such as paper focus and development. Tutees feel comfortable enough with peers to bring up these concerns which go beyond the usage level, and the writing abilities of tutors also improves as a direct result of the collaborative writing act. Researchers like Francine Danis, who found that 75% of the students in her study correctly identified both major and minor writing problems, and Anne Gere, who felt that student responses (grades five to twelve) did deal with meaning, would seem to support Bruffee's contention that students in peer groups do more than simply act as proofreaders of each other's work. Other research by Anne Gere and Robert Abbott reaffirmed the power of peer writing groups to stay focused on discussions about writing. Their research also shows that group discussions where teachers are present are significantly different from those in which teachers are absent.

Drawbacks to the method must be noted. First, collaborative learning can be time consuming (see Beaven and Abercrombie), for those writing about this method agree that some training of group members is necessary. Mary Beaven also notes that some instructors are unable to allow students the freedom required (student- rather than teacher-centered, discussion rather than lecture dominated classrooms) and therefore end up doing double work, designing *and controlling*, directing *and correcting* the groups. This problem seems to be one of teacher awareness and training rather than an inherent flaw in the method.

A final criticism develops from close research observation of groups and from student evaluations. Francine Danis found that students are not always sure of their group role, aren't able to stand back from their own writing, don't know what they want to know, and have a reluctance to offer critical comments. Elizabeth Flynn felt students lacked critical ability and attributed this to students' tendencies to supply missing information in a paper in order to make sense out of what they were reading. Again, these are problems that can be somewhat alleviated by student and teacher preparation for the method. The fact that students do need to develop a critical vocabulary from which to discuss their works is supported in Kenneth Bruffee's articles concerning the importance of language communities. Clearly, there is a need to introduce writing students to the vocabulary and terminology of the composition community.¹

PROFILES OF PEER WRITING GROUPS

Now let us enter another freshman composition classroom. Again, it is the tenth week of a fifteen-week semester. Again, the teacher is conferencing with one student and four or five peer writing groups are in session. We will observe three of the groups.

In Group A, students form a tightly knit circle. Members are discussing organizational changes that would benefit a group member's paper. The writer of the paper listens and makes notes as does the group secretary. Soon, the group monitor reminds the group that other papers remain to be discussed. The transition to the next paper is made smoothly. If the teacher were to come over to the group, she could slip into a nearby seat and participate; talk would continue, although it would be altered somewhat by the group's awareness of her presence.

If you asked members of Group A how the group method was working, members would most likely be enthusiastic, pointing out changes they have made in papers as a result of the discussion, showing how every member of the group helps by offering suggestions, explaining that they appreciate the teacher's comments but also enjoy developing their writing skills together. Group A is a successful, fully developed peer writing group.

Here is an evaluation from a member of such a group:

This is the first time I've had an English class where groups were formed. I found that I had an easier time talking in the groups than in class discussion. So I must say that it has value in letting me get my ideas across to other people in class, with much less apprehension.

Group B looks a lot like Group A. Most of the members are concentrating on a single paper. However, comments on this paper are tentative. The group gets stalled on a grammar point that no one is really interested in discussing nor competent to decide. When this happens, the writer of the paper starts to explain what she meant to do in the paper and other group members look bored. They've heard her talk like this before. Still, the members are polite and wait until the writer stops talking before moving on to another point: they find several misspellings in the paper. When the class ends, this group has only discussed two of four papers as the monitor forgot to move them on. The historian suggests that the group forgo the end of session summary and no one cares. When the teacher moves toward the group, discussion wanes and dies awkwardly. When asked how the group is doing, members can't articulate their group's progress, but insist that everything is okay. Talk picks up slowly as the teacher moves away.

Group B is finding the group method only mildly successful, for members are never really sure if they are talking about writing "in the right way." They don't feel that other members give them truly honest evaluation of their work and don't trust the evaluations they do receive. They are confused when they get teacher-graded papers returned that have low grades. They wonder why

group members didn't catch more of the problems the teacher marked. They feel comfortable with each other but are sometimes lazy and unsure of their own abilities to discuss or change their writing. They accept working in groups but are constantly waiting for something to happen. Group B is an under-developed peer writing group.

Here is an evaluation from a member of such a group:

I do like the idea of the groups. But could you please float around & insert "starter" statements for some groups if need be? Sometimes our group doesn't go very far under the analysis that we write in our journals.

Group C looks different than either Group A or Group B and looks different every time members try to start working together. Members of this group often don't come to class or come late and try to leave early. Some members are easily distracted; they look through their own bags or papers or watch other groups covertly. When this group does have more than one or two members, a single student may dominate the talk. No one has volunteered or been elected for the positions of historian and inonitor. Often the group drifts, finishing work too quickly or not moving along at all. When the teacher comes to join this group, a single member enters into a private dialogue with her. Other group members may try to avoid contact with the teacher, both in and out of class.

Group C is sure the group method is useless. No one in the group knows what is going on and the class is boring. The dominant member is resentful, feeling he is doing too much work, and the other members feel they are in the grip of yet another un-elected teacher-dictator. Group members feel unsure of their own writing and do not see how they can teach each other. They have strong suspicions that the teacher is holding back something or is too lazy to really teach them. Group C is not simply underdeveloped; it is really not a peer writing group at all.

Here is an evaluation from a member of such a group:

Individuals a little lax in group to have assignments read (including myself). We don't know what to write about, probably because we don't know what you want and don't know how to find it in the stories.

What are we looking for?

The observer of this writing class and the teacher might agree: when peer groups are fully developed (Group A), the method is exciting and rewarding for students and teacher alike, but when peer group interactions are under-developed (Group B) or break down (Group C), the method is discouraging and group work all too often feels like a matter of luck.

Obviously, these profiles are only useful in that they give a teacher a way to begin to sort out group interaction patterns. Each teacher will vary in the way she labels her groups. For instance, I evaluate group success on a continuum between fully developed and under-developed groups as distinct from non-cohering groups. Diana George in her article "Writing with Peer Groups in Composition" distinguishes between task-oriented, leaderless, and dysfunctional

groups. In both cases, in-class observations have taken place and serious consideration has been given to groups in order for a teacher to improve future group work. By profiling her own writing groups, a teacher can learn how writing peer groups can become useless and sometimes lifeless. If even one of several important problems is present in a group, such a problem can quickly move the group from success to failure. Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the attributes of successful groups and learn what can be done to move groups from failure to success and doing so will enable composition teachers to feel more comfortable using peer writing groups.

The following list shows ways groups can fail or succeed and notes the names of researchers or writers who touch on these concerns when discussing peer writing groups. I have developed my profiles of group weaknesses and strengths after reading these writers and observing composition and literature classes which I conducted by group method at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks campus, from fall 1985 to spring 1987.

Ways Peer Writing Groups Fail

1. Too much or too little leadership (Hawkins; Elbow 1977; George).
2. Poor attendance or participation or preparation of some students leading to resentment between members (Hawkins; Flynn 1982).
3. Unclear group goals; group doesn't value work or works too quickly (Johnson and Johnson; Hawkins; George).
4. Group doesn't feel confident of group members' expertise or members are afraid to offer criticism (Lagana; Danis; Flynn).
5. Group doesn't understand new role of instructor (Ziv).
6. Group never develops adequate vocabulary for discussing writing (Danis; Bruffee).
7. Group fails to record suggestions or to make changes based on members' suggestions (George).

Ways Peer Writing Groups Succeed

1. Group successfully involves all members (Johnson and Johnson; Hawkins; Elbow).
2. Group works to clarify goals and assignments (Johnson and Johnson; Elbow 1977; Danis).
3. Group develops a common vocabulary for discussing writing (Beaven; Bruffee; Danis).
4. Group learns to identify major writing problems such as organization, tone, and focus, as well as minor writing problems such as spelling errors, and so on (Bruffee; Danis; Gere; Gere and Abbot).
5. Group learns to value group work and to see instructor as a resource which the group can call on freely (Rogers; Danis; Flynn).

Most writers are in agreement, students and teachers need preparation and training for successful peer group work. Those teachers who divide students

into groups merely to provide momentary relief from the lecture classroom will develop failures similar to those listed above.

PREPARING FOR PEER WRITING GROUPS

Although the peer writing groups profiled in this paper show students critiquing each other's drafts, groups can serve a broader variety of purposes. Students can work together to discuss readings, to complete exercises, to explore writing invention strategies, and to help members with forming very early drafts. Additionally, the peer group method can be adapted to classes at the primary and secondary level, to advanced or creative writing classes, and to diverse academic disciplines.

Teachers who want to use peer writing groups in their classroom should plan ahead. They need to realize that the group method rests on a theory of collaborative learning and they will be more successful if they read widely in this area. While reading, a teacher should ask several questions:

1. Do I understand the theory behind peer writing groups?
2. Do I have a clear use for this method in my classroom?
3. What are my goals for students when using this method?

Additionally, because group work is based on a theory of learning that students may be unfamiliar with or resistant to, the well prepared teacher will acquaint students with concepts of collaborative learning through prepared handouts, class discussion, and continual monitoring of group work. After gaining a deeper understanding through reading, teachers need to visualize the place of peer writing groups in their entire curriculum. Students need to develop a group identity and participate in a new writing community. To function well, group members must be present, which requires a class attendance policy. A teacher might decide to use groups for a certain percentage of class time. I have found using groups 50 to 75% of my available class periods most effective. This percentage allows my students to develop a group identity yet regroup into a class on a regular basis in order to maintain a class identity also.

Classroom communities are formed by the school registrar, academic departments, and the enrolling student. How should peer group communities be formed? To start, teachers may divide a class into sets of four to five students or students may start working collaboratively in pairs and then pairs may be joined. Although many criteria could be presented for forming such groups, nothing in the peer group literature supports any one in particular. First week diagnostic writings may be used to organize groups with a balance of strong and weak writers. Students may rate themselves on matters such as ability to lead, to help, to take risks, and so on, and groups may be balanced with a member strong in each area. In addition, I try to balance groups by gender and by age.

Once groups are formed, there is no certain number of sessions needed to develop a strong sense of group community. Some groups develop rapport imme-

diately and some take much longer. Groups can develop a radical (sometimes disruptive) streak and also a conservative (and equally disruptive) bent. Groups work best when they are balanced, focused, and comfortable. Depending on my course goals, I try to let groups work together for at least four sessions, and I rarely leave a group together for an entire semester.

The more groups are used, the more adept a teacher becomes in divining group personalities. Sometimes a teacher needs to intervene and change group membership (placing an overly dominant member in another, more challenging group, and so on), but often it is wiser to let the group itself solve group problems. Ideally, groups that stay together over a long period develop a strong group identity and sense of shared community. Equally, groups that change membership, partially or wholly, are often revitalized and ready to undertake new course challenges with greater enthusiasm.

Because groups develop as real writing communities, choosing a group name can help members identify with their new community. Ordering and clarifying group members' roles such as monitor and historian and general member also assures that group work will be carried on in an orderly manner. Groups are formed to work together, so group projects should be clearly articulated in handout form or as directions on the chalkboard, and group work should be real work, contributing to each member's writing development.

Time should be allowed for groups to share their work, conclusions, and progress with the whole class in order to support the class as a larger community and to keep groups from becoming too isolated. Reporting on what the group accomplished each session, in the form of historian's notes in a group folder, provides useful artifacts for group self-evaluation and teacher evaluation of the group session. To review, when forming groups for the first time, I ask the members to give themselves a name and to choose a monitor (timekeeper) and historian (secretary). Each group is given a folder for saving work and recording discussions.

TRAINING PEER WRITING GROUPS

To work well together, peer writing groups need training in two areas in particular: group roles and writing response. It is not enough to ask the groups to elect a monitor and a historian, but those individuals should have clear directions as to their roles. If a monitor does not act as the group caretaker, making sure each member gets time to respond to writing and time to have writing discussed and making sure the group performs the group tasks in time to share with the whole class, then the group will risk failure. If the historian does not record group discussions, there will be little continuity from session to session and no product to show the group and the teacher where the group has been and what it has done. When groups are first formed, handouts to elected members, as well as a handout detailing the responsibilities of a member in general—attendance, support, sharing, and so on—can speed the training in this area.

Even more important, group members will be teaching each other to talk about writing. This talk can be initiated by the teacher, reinforced by the class text, and nurtured by whole class discussion, but it will be brought to fruition in the group itself as members learn to improve their writing. In this effort, the teacher functions as the conduit linking the class to the academic community. She may begin by teaching the class necessary terminology (concerning writing process and writing analysis) and by training writers and readers to work together through role playing, reviewing sample essays, and so on. In their initial critique sessions, groups can work to answer set questions or can learn to develop their own critical concerns for papers. If composition terms such as prewriting, drafting, revising, focus, organization, and tone are introduced in class discussion, show up on group handouts, are reinforced in peer writing group discussions, and recorded in group minutes, such terms will soon become part of the peer group's working vocabulary.

MONITORING PEER WRITING GROUPS

During group work, the teacher is extremely busy, although not necessarily appearing so, for she is the group and class facilitator, deciding when to intervene in groups and when to reconvene the groups into a class to share results, review strategies, or speed up information dissemination. Sometimes the best thing a teacher can do is to listen and watch her groups quietly and unobtrusively; sometimes she must participate in groups to insure that each group is working efficiently, but there is no single right way to help groups succeed.

A teacher needs to experiment, but she should do so carefully. She should keep records of her groups (a personal journal is a good place to start), for she learns from each one of them. She can monitor groups by sight (regularly noting what is happening in each by direct observation); by sound (listening to tape recordings of groups at a later date); by direct contact (visits to and participation in groups); and by reviewing group or individual artifacts (learning logs, group weekly reports, group self-evaluations, questionnaires). It is important to remember that the teacher should be actively involved with the groups on a class by class basis.

EVALUATING PEER WRITING GROUPS

A teacher can evaluate the effectiveness of her peer writing groups, although few methods for doing so are quantifiable. Good evaluation results from good planning and from sensitive and careful review throughout and at the end of each course.

Teachers can determine if students are attaining [...] goals she set for group work. Group folders when examined tell a story of good attendance, completed work, and enlarged understanding. Self-evaluation on the part of students and teacher can chronicle success with the method and pinpoint areas for future

work and improvement. And, most important, gains in individual student writing can be assessed.

In brief, a teacher can use any of the monitoring documents (group folders, tapes of group work, group self-evaluations, and so on) as well as her own journal of group work to develop a fairly clear profile of how successful each group was.

Measurements of student growth in collaborative learning techniques and writing in general can be accomplished with pre and post testing in the following areas:

1. pre and post written descriptions of what students feel can be accomplished in writing groups,
2. pre and post written descriptions of students' writing process,
3. pre and post writing apprehension tests,
4. pre and post essay samples.

Teachers would hope to find that post written descriptions of the group method show a greater understanding of and enjoyment of the method. Post descriptions of students' writing process should show a greater awareness of the writing process in general and as it relates to an individual student. Post writing apprehension tests should show a decline in writing apprehension. And post essay samples should show an improvement in writing when holistically evaluated (Bishop "Qualitative").

A teacher who hopes to use peer writing groups in her classroom should prepare for success. She needs to understand her writing groups will not always be completely effective but can be made more effective if she is willing to train herself and her students. In a sense, a teacher using peer writing groups must become a researcher in her own classroom. She plans for her class, trains group members, monitors and evaluates them, and, the next semester, begins the process again, refining and developing her talents as a group facilitator based on her own observations. This teacher will be willing to experiment, to redefine group failures as steps in a larger process that leads to success, and to have realistic expectations for this holistic teaching method. Before long, those expectations will be met and, hopefully, surpassed.

NOTE

1. This review of research into writing peer groups was completed in 1986, and significant amounts of work have been done on this subject since that time. I'd send readers to *Small Groups in Writing Workshops: Invitations to a Writer's Life* (Robert Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Rick Evans) for recent scholarship and bibliographic references.