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Making Good Writing a Team Sport

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*During the semester you'll be working
as critique teams, and the success of
your essays and grades will depend in
part on the level of your investment in
your peers' papers.*

--My instructions to students

English teachers have long understood the importance of audience and peer critiques to the writing process. Despite romantic tales of poets toiling away in quiet garrets or solitary rooms, the truth is that we write with and for a community of readers. Perhaps Donald Murray said it best when he suggested "the act of writing is not complete until the writer has a reader who understands what he has to say." The writer, Murray continued, "must experience the problem of writing for different audiences in a way which will make them accept what he has to say, and believe it" (42).

While the notion of writing as a social event seems evident to most of us who teach it, the concept was never embraced by many of my students. Through rough and final drafts—where I asked students to work together to critique their peers' work and offer suggestions for improvement—I found critique sheets to be short and perfunctory. Despite my caveat that writing is a collaborative event, most of my students treated group work as a required regimen, something that had to be done to satisfy me rather than as a way to facilitate good prose. The familiar phrase, "Good job—I have no suggestions," was all too common a refrain as one student reacted to a peer's paper. Rather than learn from other's work—and become partners in composing—students seemed to see little benefit in the various peer evaluations we did as part of the writing process.

In an effort to make my students a more dynamic and genuine part of the essay's natural development, I began requiring students to make formal "reports" after completing a fellow team member's paper. Essential to this report was the idea that students would form semester-long teams and make significant investments in each other's essays throughout the term. "I want you to take an interest in your team members' paper and find some support and commitment in being part of a small editing community," I told them in introducing the idea. "These people are your first audience, your first initiation into writing as a social endeavor."

At the heart of the critique-team approach is the well-researched notion that composition is a dynamic process of discovering new meanings through social interactions and through considerations of audience. Writing, like reading, is a transactional process, and it is critical for student authors to understand the importance of how readers respond to their writing and to react effectively. Rather than seeing writing as an objective, impersonal endeavor—one that requires only the completion of a prefabricated rubric—it is more effectively seen as a recursive set of stages that are influenced by culture, politics, and the nuances of the setting. In the end, good writing reflects the influences

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of many people. Howard Tinberg captures this social aspect in eloquent terms when he declares "thoughtful writing has a polyphonic quality, containing a tissue of perspectives as well as range of voices" (56). Audience is critical to the success of the paper, but too many of our writers dismiss peers readers, seeing them as an insignificant stage in getting a good grade from the instructor—the ultimate reader of their texts.

My goal was to stress the idea of team, so that audience became more concrete and productive. While team members would constitute a helpful set of readers and responders, they also represented a diverse audience, giving writers a better understanding of composition as a social activity. As writers considered the men and women who would read and report on their essays—people of various races, beliefs, and ages—they understood more significantly the concept of composition as a social event. In short, then, the concept of team established writing as an event that is crafted for audiences—audiences that have different expectations and values as writers move to revision and change.

In establishing the significance of social construction in the creation of an essay, I also remind students of Bakhtin's assertion that language constructs us socially and that it is through language that we learn about ourselves by cobbling together a persona (Bakhtin 272). When we read a text we are engaging in an act of creation, where a writer is gradually becoming a person by communicating ideas to another. It is not a simple process of spelling words and crafting correct paragraphs—it is not inert words—but a personal, interactive venture that defines who we are. In addressing this notion, Charles Schuster adds, “in this view, language is primal. All that we see, so, and experience—all that we are—is filtered and organized through language. It permeates all our ideas, actions, and basic understandings of the world around us” (44). Through this social dynamic, an utterance becomes part of a discourse, and discourses are imbued with life when accepted by another.

Forming Teams

The first step in forming critique teams is to establish the importance of student response to the composing process. Students need to understand that their reactions to a text are meaningful and that their report constitutes a major part of the writing venture. On the second day of class, I gave students some sample papers to read and critique and told them they were expected to provide a formal oral report, documenting their response to the paper and their suggestions for revision. “I want authors to know how you transacted with their writing,” I told them in preparing them

for the team concept. After assessing the sample essays, students came together to discuss the social concerns that affect any literary response and the way they should write to their peers. Key to a good response, we agreed, was to provide an honest vision of our reading, so writers could see how their essay affects readers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

For decades, the word transaction has been equated with reading and the work of Louise Rosenblatt. In the *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, Rosenblatt tells that reading is an active and artistic transaction with a text, where a reader and writer exchange values and ideas and coalesce to create a poem. Central to this premise is the notion that language and people are symbiotic. We cannot create a novel or an essay without people who are transacting with the text and infusing it with life. Rosenblatt suggests that every reading event is imbued with the intentions of the reader and writer and that a reading is not real until it is brought to life by a person: “The reading of a text is an event occurring at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader. The transaction,” Rosenblatt argues, “will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader” (20). Thus, Eustacia Vye is loved or vilified depending upon the reader's background in reading *Return of the Native*. And so it is true with our academic writing as well. Success is predicated, in part, upon our ability to appreciate the social character of writing and to value readers who transact with our scholarly texts.

The notion of critique teams reflects much of what is discussed in Deborah Brandt's and Martin Nystrand's work on “intensive peer review.” In their essay “Response to Writing as Context,” they suggest that peer critiquing lends something unique to student awareness and helps writers to see “the balance their texts must strike between their own intentions and their readers' expectations.” In fact, they suggest, “intensive peer review accomplishes this, moreover, in a way that is not always possible or as fully possible when students write exclusively for the teacher” (210). The authors go on to suggest that when students read and critique each other's paper, their writing becomes more collaborative, more positive, and more aimed at substantive change: “Students who regularly

wrote for each other increasingly saw their texts not as something to be judged, but rather as the functional means and their best chance for balancing their own purposes as writers with the expectations of their readers” (212). Increasingly these students treated revision as a matter of “reconceptualization” (212).

The goal for my composition class was to foster more of the collaboration that Nystrand and Brandt discuss. Instead of seeing critiques as an assigned formality that would ultimately be graded by the instructor, I wanted the critique to become a significant part of the writing and revision process. I wanted the concept of audience to change to include their peers. Central to this goal is to help students understand the cultural and political components of literacy. To write well, we must write for diverse audiences and be forever cognizant of how our prose affects people from different backgrounds. “I see literacy use as cultural practice,” writes Victoria Purcell Gates in discussing the language, literacy, and power. “It is cultural practice because reading and writing are woven into the everyday experiences of people, and these everyday activities, attitudes, and beliefs help to define and distinguish among cultural groups” (128).

Again, the notion of writing as a team experience—a team of participants from different cultures—begins by establishing the peer critique as a formal, team-based enterprise. Where before I simply asked students to form groups and compose short responses to their peers’ work, I now required that they prepare a report and short oral presentation. After forty-five minutes of reading and writing responses to each other’s papers, each team would be asked to offer their formal oral responses on their team members’ papers, which became an important aspect of the process, and students would be given a grade on their ability to consider a plethora of different important characteristics of a successful paper.

Street’s Ideological and Autonomous Models

First, I wanted students to consider the way they, as

individuals, responded to the text and then to consider the way other people of their background would react. Would the paper be inflammatory for a minority student? Would it offend a woman, a Catholic? How might a person who is gay respond to an essay that opposed gay marriage? Much of what we write has a voice that reveals our position of power, our values, our sensitivity toward particular issues. When we acknowledge an audience beyond an instructor, we animate the writing process and thrust students into the transactional spotlight. “The act of assessing must itself be a transaction, a building of meaning,” writes Robert Probst (78).

In stressing the responses of students in the writing and revision process, we are emphasizing the “ideological” nature of all composition and the importance of seeing literacy as a living, evolving phenomenon—something that, like a literary transaction, happens as an event in time. In his work *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Brian Street depicts literacy as either autonomous or ideological. The autonomous model, argues Street, is impervious to social agendas and is constructed on fixed,

Academic writing, from the perspective of [Street’s ideological] theory, is riveted by the voices of real people, who are moved and jolted by the politics that course through the writing.

immutable standards. The words of a religious leader might be considered an autonomous example of a literacy that is supposedly independent or insulated from the politics of ambiguity. Interestingly, it often assumed that academic writing is autonomous or fixed in terms of what is right and wrong. Many instructors still see composition as an objective exercise that transcends politics or social context. To simply arrange paragraphs in a coherent order and to prove one’s thesis is all that is needed. In this paradigm, meaning resides on the paper and is placed there from a specific part of a book or in the instruction by a teacher and is simply a matter of citing the attributes of the model academic paper.

The ideological paradigm, in contrast, is located in specific social practice and is forever touched by the values of others. It is a literacy that is affected by the inexorable voices of an audience, the contingencies of a particular time and place. Academic writing, from the perspective of this theory, is riveted by the voices of real people, who are moved and jolted by the politics that course through the writing. Audience is only important in the ideological

model, for only ideological prose accepts the significance of people to the writing of quality scholarship. In the end, Street urges us to believe that all literacy is ideological, that even the most sacred truths are the manifestation of political wrangling and personal belief. Far from being static or autonomous, literacy is always ideological, permeated with the values and cultures of its participants. Writing, in the end, is “socially constructed and deeply embedded in prevailing ideologies” (115).

In establishing critique teams, it was imperative that I help my students to appreciate the ideological nature of the compositions they write. When an essay is composed on the efficacy of affirmative action, it is bound to become part of a very personal and ideological debate—one that includes the voices and verities of many different people. The power of our writing, then, depends on our ability to consider the ideological transactions of fellow readers and adjust our prose to make it both cogent and effective. Even the most seemingly apolitical paper—the description of an event, for instance—is ideological. When students write about their car accident and recovery, they are asking readers to compare their experiences with those of the author. Can readers empathize with a person who was arrested for drinking while intoxicated? Different readers respond in different ways to the essay that chronicles the “glories” of hunting and killing a deer; therefore, it is imperative for writers to consider the transactions of a colorful audience.

The first step in establishing effective, responsive critique teams is to clearly establish the preeminence of ideology in all of literacy. We cannot write successfully until we consider the feeling and values that resonate through our classrooms. Thus, it is critical to help students to practice reading a few essays in the incipient days of the composition class. Students need to see how their reactions vary and how their heritage and history affect their responses. They need to understand that writing is about expressing what one wants to say but doing it so that an audience will embrace or at least understand its message.

Poetry and Personal Transactions

In this reader-response world, “meaning is context-dependent and intricately associated with the reading

process” (Bressler 80). If students are to appreciate the social construction and ideological nature of a text—and the personal transaction that makes writing an open, evolving process—they must come to see how we all build Rosenblatt’s version of a “poem” from the words on the printed page. Only in comprehending the living aspect of writing can students come to value the audience and the critique teams that will be their first audience.

To help students understand the dynamic aspects of transactional process, I usually spend a class session on reading and responding to a short but provocative poem. In inviting students to react to a poem’s meaning, I emphasize the way that writing is manipulated by a reader and the importance of gleaning ideas and reactions from others in writing successfully for an audience.

I usually use a short poem by a well know author, since I am interested in culling reactions from my students and revealing the way that politics and culture help shape a writing. In asking students to read Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” or any similar poem, I ask them the meaning and the personal and social history that are part of that interpretation. Indeed, a poem only exists in the reader’s consciousness, so it is essential to show that even a short poem can be imbued with a plethora of readings that are all animated by valid ideological responses. In reading “The Road Not Taken,” for example, one student fashions a work of art that is about the mistakes we make and the roads we travel in trying to find the paths to success. Another student disagrees, saying that the poem is about the lack of choices we have in our world and how the two similar paths reflect the dearth of different life choices we can make. “Like Democrats and Republicans, the paths Frost speaks of are virtually the same and demonstrate our lack of choices in life,” wrote one student.

In garnering different responses from my students, I return to the myriad ways each reader evokes a meaning from the written words and the need to fashion our writing to respect the many readings that emanate from critique sessions. In observing the many reactions to even a simply poem, students begin to understand the power of words and the way those words are processed by their peers.

A second way to emphasize the reader’s place in the composition process is to bring in the lyrics from a popular song

and ask students to provide the correct interpretation for the theme. I have used songs like the Eagles' "Hotel California" or Elton John's "Rocket Man" to garner different responses and show the active way these readings are structured. Gradually, students begin to see the way "webs of feeling" (Rosenblatt 137) help make a poem and how their papers must respond to the nuances of a dynamic community of readers. They come to appreciate the need for specificity, the critical importance of using words that will fit the meaning. Telling a listener that you spent the "evening" with someone is totally different than saying you spent the "night" together. Once we see the ideological nature of words—and the way they are manipulated by readers and their cultural schema—the faster we become better writers in a diverse discourse community.

Critique Teams

In my classes, critique teams were comprised of either four or five people and remained uniform throughout much of the term. If students wanted to switch or add a new person, it was acceptable, but I wanted the feeling that writers had an audience they knew before they started writing. On days when the first draft of their essays were critiqued, students were asked to have two persons from their team read and write a short report on their essay and prepare for an oral presentation after critiques were completed. In particular, the members were asked to respond to their personal reaction to writing, the voice, the point of view. Did anything offend you? Next, all students discussed the most positive aspects of the paper and why they liked it. Third, they offer visions of what was weakest and conclude the critique with suggestions for revision. After doing this for forty-five minutes, teams rejoined the class as a whole and we asked individual team members to report on the papers they read and assessed.

Immediately interesting about the team reports was how diverse and quintessentially ideological they were. Students from various teams expounded on different strengths and weaknesses and exhibited the countervailing values of a diverse community. Janet liked Jerrod's essay on his father and the first time he saw him cry. However, Jacola, an African American in the same team, was incredulous in considering the notion of a Black man crying in front of his son. "I can't see it," she said in our first critique session over the description paper. "I never saw a Black man cry in front

of his son. It just doesn't happen."

Jacola's response underscores the ideological nature of writing and the importance of engaging students in this aspect of writing. As writers become aware of the significance of audience and the fractious nature of communicating ideas, they begin to transcend the superficial elements of writing and focus on questions that are integral to all good authors. If we make audience needs and expectations central to our discussion of all writing, write Ryder, Vander Lei, and Roen, "students will learn to wrestle with audience negotiations in our classes and will therefore be better prepared to analyze the discourse demands they will face once they move on" (69).

Indeed, as students moved from team reports to the revising process, they did so with a clearer understanding of audience impact and how it transcends the voice of their instructor. I could not include the many prisms from which the papers would be processed, so teams became an essential part of our writing and revising stages. And, because the team reports were graded and the oral aspects were required, students invested more time in them and writers took them more seriously. Beyond the requirements, however, students began to appreciate the social character of writing and the fact that their audience transcends the instructor.

"I didn't like this paper, but I'm not sure if it is because of my personal bias for animals," wrote Pamela, who was responding to an argumentative paper on hunting. As our class coalesced to share responses, A.J. was adamant in his feeling about an essay against animal rights and in support of hunting. As an avid hunter, he felt that the composition was totally effective and needed the detailed description of the hunt—including the following of blood in the snow and the final shot to the head. "Without this," he argued, "I lose much of the raw honesty of the practice. This is part of nature's work. I don't care if you're a vegan or whatever," he added, "I don't want that stuff forced on me, and that's what this paper is about."

Again, our team approach had punctuated the volatility of audience and the political nature of writing. As he discussed the aspects of the paper in opposition to animal rights and vegetarianism, he enumerated the many places where he felt his way of life was being vilified and the need to kill deer and other animals to reduce their

numbers. And while his essay was a passionate statement for his love of hunting, it clearly was ineffective for an audience that represented a mosaic of diverging values. The essential efficacy of team critiques is the engagement of the readers and the revelation that all readers transact with our words and ideas in personal ways.

“You need to temper this if you’re going to make it work on a wider level,” argued another student who was witnessing the defensive response. “Your paper is fine for a group of outdoorsmen, but you can tailor this to win over people who are on the fence.” A.J.’s argument was debated by other team members, some who felt the language was too harsh and a few who felt that it had an incisive, powerful effect. “So what is an author to do when there is some disagreement as to the essay’s impact?” I asked. How do we tailor a paper to reach as many people as possible?

Such questions dramatize the importance of critique teams and the collaboration that comes from it. In previous classes I never had the kind of productive sparring that I had among team members because I had never compelled students to invest more of themselves in the peer critique process. Because there was never a demand that students articulate their vision of the paper, students never felt the impact of a diverse and volatile audience to this extent. While the earlier critiques had been helpful, the team concept thrust students into the role of official reader and reviewer and forced them to acknowledge the repository of feelings from which interpretations spring. It codified the notion that writing is social and that peer response is more than a formality as students wend their way to the final draft.

The Notion of Team

The entire concept of team recalls people working as a unit to win some sort of competition. In our popular culture we are immersed in stories of people uniting to fight and struggle to achieve a common goal. In the writing class, this notion is only slightly different, as readers are told to clash, to play devil’s advocate, to spar with each other in an attempt to make their peers’ papers better. Throughout many of the critique sessions, I encourage teams to maintain a contentious but friendly demeanor. I want there to be the needed tension to produce something that transcends

the original draft. I want the constructive agitation that engenders an improved essay. In moving toward the team concept, I think it is important to see the artistic grappling that leads to better writing and facilitate it in student engagements. Embedded in the notion of team, then, is the ability to transcend the homogeneous reader—a team of real people. Because students are confronted by a group of readers who question their work—and design strategies to improve it—they become aware of the realities and complexities of audience. “Student writers need to have direct experiences with audiences, not just an audience. A method for accomplishing this is to have classmates be audiences,” write Ryder, Vander Lei, and Roen (64).

Conferences and Team Critiques

Not only are students asked to work together in peer teams but also to meet for writing conferences. In asking them to conference in teams, I am able to extend the need to write for more than the instructor and the many readers that might interact with the paper’s ideas. “For the individual reader each text is a new situation, a new kind of challenge,” writes Rosenblatt (173). Meeting in conferences allows us to share reactions and appreciate the way words, sentences, and theories are handled by the various people on the team. During these conferences, I ask team writers to bring their portfolio of work and the responses garnered from readers throughout the term. As they are reviewed, we are able to offer suggestions as to further revision and glean intriguing facts about the transaction of various readers and a text. Writers become more aware of the importance to write for a diverse audience and the dynamic nature of language. Perhaps most important, they are able to become immersed in the dynamics of a broad audience of readers who see their writing through a very unique cultural oracle.

In his essay “The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,” Walter Ong reminds us that the writer is always writing for a large, unwieldy set of people that can never be defined or identified. “Readers do not form a collectivity, acting here and now on one another and on the speaker as members of an audience do. Readership is not a collective noun. It is an abstraction in a way that audience is not” (58). Thus, students can only learn about the complexities of writing by being confronted with myriad readers—ones

who form a team and establish a diverse and dynamic audience. In teams, conferences become lively affairs, where readers and writers share ownership over essays and fill the room with the ebullience of a socially constructed paper—one that is animated by a team of readers.

I'll never forget a conference including students from different racial and political backgrounds and the fun we had in discussing their reactions to various compositions. For the white student, writing had to be in standard English or it was "sloppy," while the two minority students—one Black and the other Hispanic—were more willing to embrace the use of vernacular as part of the authentic world upon which the essay was based. Perhaps most importantly, students who conference and work as teams, come to realize that writing is about communicating with an audience of people, not a monolithic academic paradigm. For the white student, there was a lesson in the dynamic, evanescent aspects of writing for disparate readers. "I couldn't get into your formal style," said the African American student during our conference. "I think you could win me over and still maintain your professional approach with a few changes."

"Writers and writing exist within a culture and use language created by that culture;" argue McAndrew and Reigstad. "That is, writers and writing both produce and are a product of wider social and political realities" (23). In making peer response a team endeavor, I invited students to explore the quintessentially social and cultural aspects of writing. I whisked them into a practice that is inextricably political, dynamic, and forever contingent upon context and reader. There is no better way to teach students about the realities of language than to make their responses central to the revision process—to remove the instructor from the initial assessments and thrust students into the spotlight. Writing is always social but we must make this clear for our students before they are able to feel empowered as readers. Sometimes, it is necessary for an instructor to simply say as little as possible and create a forum for student discovery. This, to my mind, is the most important part of the team concept.

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