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Peer Teaching in the Writing Classroom—Not Again?

David James

Around fifteen years ago, as an idealistic graduate student at the University of Iowa, I led off my first-ever published article, "Peer Teaching in the Writing Classroom," with the following:

For sixteen years I wrote papers read only by teachers, and for the next two years I assigned papers read only by me. During that time neither I nor my students ever really learned how to write. I've since gone back to school to a writing program and have discovered there is a way to teach writing that works. It asks writers to critique their peers' writing....[T]o me, peer evaluation is brand new because, as acquainted with the method as my English teachers may have been, they never let on, and I never learned how to write for anyone or anything but them and their artificial writing situations. (48)

I can easily recall the militant feelings generating that paragraph, as well as my firm, though untested, pedagogical resolve. Now I would use slightly different language to express those beliefs (for example, "respond to" and "response" rather than "critique" and "evaluation"), but quite frankly, I still believe what I wrote. Since then, I've put peer response to the test with students twelve to eighty-two years old and can say from experience that this indeed is "a way to teach writing that works."

By now, though, most of us know this way, or at least have heard about it—perhaps ad nauseam—even if we haven't quite given ourselves

over to it wholeheartedly. So I don't wish to cover that ground again or promote any particular way to implement it. There are all kinds of ways to get students talking with each other about their writing and, depending on the circumstances, most ways have merit.

Rather, I would now like to catalog various determining factors—both in and outside the classroom—whose recognition has helped me and others choose for ourselves which peer-response methods or combinations of methods to use, with whom, and when. Such cataloging may, even more importantly for some, simply encourage by inclusion those teachers who are already experimenting, but who find themselves in situations that don't readily welcome student-centered methods.

Before that, however, this crucial point: behind the dizzying maze of variables and options that will follow shortly rests a fundamental fact that I first learned to articulate thanks to Peter Elbow. In his *Writing with Power*, he prophesies, "You will improve your writing more through freewriting and **sharing** than through any other activity described in this book" (24, emphasis added). And, in an interview for *Writing Teacher*, he reiterates this belief, observing that

students learn enormously from just sharing their writing with each other. When they read their works out loud, they can feel when a sentence works well or badly—through the

feeling in their mouth and the sound in their ear. Most writers agree that the mouth and the ear are the main organs through which we learn to write better. And students learn from hearing each other's writing. Notice there is no instruction: it's all learning and no teaching. ("When Teachers Are Writers" 6)

I have found this to be true for me and for my students. The mere act of sharing—the common denominator among all peer-response situations—will always overshadow my clever efforts to orchestrate feedback techniques over a given time. Simply getting student writers together to hear each other's work, therefore, dominates my planning and, to a great extent, any other beneficial outcomes are gravy.

A Short Look Back

I first barged into this approach to teaching writing when many people and I still preached **the** writing process, as if all writers writing well always follow a single, describable process that teachers can make conscious for students by breaking it down into distinctly labeled stages for them to perform: prewriting, writing, rewriting, editing, publishing, to name one common set.

Likewise, equally system-hungry thinking begat early writing-group methodologies, mine included. Scheduling who'd do what, with what, when, and with whom throughout a given "writing week," for example, certainly made things easier to run, control, and predict. After all, we had already committed to curbing our workbooks and exercises and red-pen mentalities, which had always before made lesson-planning and evaluation and grading manageable, so we needed at least this much tidiness. But our writing and teaching experiences and, on their heels, the professional literature showed us that forces inside and outside the classroom were not always, or perhaps not even usually, going to sanction such orderly approaches. A swarm of external and internal variables unpredictably forced its way into the formula, in turn forcing us to face facts about students and their writing—facts that we had already known but not transferred from our own experiences as writers.

External Variables

For the teacher assigned to Classroom A of Building B in District C, establishing and using writing groups depends a great deal on variables outside of his or her control. Something as non-academic as extent of access to photocopying, for example, can sometimes govern the entire program.

Other, more fundamental, factors, however, also have far-reaching effects. Students' ages, for one, determine what a teacher can rightfully expect from a class in such independent situations as small groups. And alongside that obvious consideration fall in various less obvious ones such as the current mix of students' personality types and their inherent and developed social and verbal abilities. Thus, not only do writing teachers' situations vary based on the grades they teach, but the individual teacher's situation varies from year to year, and even from class to class at the secondary level. Not to mention that changes occur unpredictably within the same year's group(s) of students simply because time passes.

The array of external variables affecting writing groups grows even more complex thanks to the particular school system. A district's contributions include such elements as its overall curriculum, its preferred, encouraged, and discouraged teaching methods, and its environment, both physical and professional. The curriculum, for example, may clearly invite or prohibit peer-interaction approaches. Or, through its silence, the curriculum may leave such choices completely up to the individual teacher, in which case his or her current students may have extremely varied small-group experience even if most of the students have come up through the same school system or have even been in the same building.

What's more, the physical realities of classroom space and its adaptability to small groups as well as factors such as the professional climate of collegial relationships will affect small group teaching as much as they do any other innovative approach. If a teacher, for instance, has too small of a classroom or must coexist with a largely rigid faculty that resists change and snubs those who experiment, then that teacher may find such experimentation discouraging, at best.

Internal Variables

Our writing teacher in Classroom A, Building B, District C can't do much about any of the above except perhaps bring a few colleagues along somewhat by example or exhortation, so most of his or her attention should focus on those factors that depend primarily on his or her own curriculum and planning. And one way to categorize these is to see them either as matters of course content or as matters of timing.

Peer-response methods should, of course, complement what students are writing. A particular genre requires and deserves an appropriate type of response, both to shape it and to recognize the likely extent of its author's personal stake. For example, what students do in small groups when sharing editorials on school-related issues should vary greatly from what they do when sharing poems, science fiction stories, informative across-the-curriculum reports, or personal journal entries.

The teacher's expectations and standards for student writing should also play a role in determining what peer teaching approaches to take. To what extent do students understand expectations and to what extent can students help each other meet them should be familiar questions guiding peer interaction. To further complicate matters, the teacher who uses what we've come to call a process approach to teaching writing must also try to match group work both with where students are in a given project's development (brainstorming? exploratory drafting? proofreading?) and with what expectations he or she has for various phases of completion (a page of details? a beginning, middle, and end? a finished draft, complete with citations and bibliography?).

Which brings up the larger matter of timing of all sorts. Matching response methods with where students are in creating a particular work must yield to broader concerns such as when during the entire school year such response is even taking place. How well students know each other and their teacher and how long they've had to adapt themselves to the class environment have everything to do with what a teacher can rightly attempt and expect. More specifically, to what extent the teacher has readied his or her students to do various kinds of group work with writing—

from mere sharing to all-out, criteria-based criticism—will most likely predict their success or failure. And readiness results not only from familiarity but also from quantity and frequency: How much time do groups spend together at a given time, practicing a given kind of response? And how often do they get together over the course of time?

Peer-Teaching Options

The maze is complicated—though worth confronting—and can become even more so when it all comes down to the individual teacher, who is naturally influenced by his or her own personality and preferred teaching style, and who has to make the actual choices. This is the reality that we who teach writing this way have come to face: we must each construct our own versions of grouping students to share their writing.

What follows, then, is a catalog of questions that only individual teachers can answer, only for themselves, only through trial and error, and probably only with and for a particular batch of students. These questions may seem to unfold in a logical order, but actually any question could lead to any other to initiate the process. To illustrate their usefulness, I have also described an actual scenario in which I had to answer many of them myself.

I. Grouping Students for Peer Response:

A. Who with whom?

1. Students' choice?
2. Teacher's choice?
3. Random grouping, such as by counting off?
4. Some combination, such as by students choosing a partner and the teacher grouping these pairs?

B. How many in a group?

1. Pairs?
2. Trios? (Are "threes" dangerous?)
3. Quartets?

4. Even more to elicit many perspectives?
- C. For how long?
1. One time only, then regroup for variety or for getting everyone comfortable with everyone else?
 2. By unit, to avoid starting-over inefficiencies?
 3. By marking period, to foster group development?
 4. By semester, to test people's patience?
 5. Some combination, such as occasional regrouping for variety but then returning to "base" groups for long-term cohesiveness?

II. Peer Response in Action:

- A. Where will the groups work?
1. All in the same room? (What about the noise?)
 2. Spread out in adjacent rooms, if available? (What about control?)
 3. Some spill-over into the hallway? (What about the principal?)
- B. How predetermined will the time-on-task expectations be?
1. Loosely, to promote comfortable relationships?
 2. Strictly, to promote necessary productivity?
 3. Is there a happy medium?
- C. How will the work proceed?
1. Simply reading aloud, "sharing," others merely listening?
 2. Reading aloud twice, others jotting notes during and between readings to prompt feedback?
 3. Passing out copies to group members, reading aloud once, then all reading silently, jotting notes for oral feedback?
 4. Passing out copies, then everyone reading silently, jotting notes, and returning copies?
- D. Tone of response?
1. Noncritical, merely affirming?
 2. Mostly affirming, with some suggestions?
 3. Mostly suggesting, affirmation assumed?
 4. Hard-nosed challenging/critical, such as in a role play of views opposing a persuasive essay?
- E. Focus of response?
1. Global or particular?
 2. Nonjudgmental "saying back" or judgmental evaluation?
 3. Reader-based or criterion-based feedback?
 4. Open-ended suggesting or product-oriented guidance?
 5. Rough-draft development or final-draft editing?
- F. Control of response?
1. At random discussion?
 2. Author-directed response?
 3. Author-silent response?
 4. Group-leader-directed response?
 5. Teacher-predetermined response?
- G. Medium of response?
1. All oral?
 2. Questions, comments, and suggestions written on the piece of writing itself?
 3. Feedback written on teacher-produced checksheets/evaluation forms?
 4. Editing, using proofreaders' code jotted directly onto the text itself?

5. Some combination, such as jotting comments on copies of the text, followed by discussion?

An Application

I've probably not exhausted the questions I ask myself, and other writing teachers would certainly create different lists of questions because, again, we just can't lay out this approach for each other as neatly as I used to think. But here's an example of how I recently answered these groups of questions for myself when working with a class of eighth and ninth grade "gifted and talented" students at my college. As the scenario proceeds, I have referred to my list of questions by Roman numeral, capital letter, and number, but have also explained any variations as necessary.

This group of a dozen students from all over the county would leave their own schools at lunchtime to come to my college every Thursday afternoon for two and a half hours, solely to learn to write better. As second-year participants in the program, they were used to this once-per-week schedule as well as the regular use of small writing groups at the program's core. As a result, they also knew each other quite well even though they normally attended different schools. Nevertheless, as any group will do in time, by second semester they had long ago found who they most liked to work with, if given the choice, and had in fact gotten into a rut at the point I'm about to describe. Therefore, from the start of our play-writing unit, which would last about six weeks, I decided they needed to work with some relatively new people and so grouped them myself (I, A, 2) into three groups of four (I, B, 3) to avoid the possible nastiness of two-versus-one these now comfortable adolescents were known to resort to when trio-ed. Because play writing was new to them and, in this case, would involve following a process of self-exploration and multiple drafting, I announced that these groups would stay together throughout the unit; they would then see the growth that took place in each other's work and not be starting from scratch every time they shared revisions (I, C, 2).

The choice of where the groups would work was limited the entire year to our assigned classroom (II, A, 1) since we were already borrowing what little space we had from the natural sciences division of the college. With only three groups working at once, however, the noise level usually stayed pleasantly low and, in fact, energized the space with its motivational din.

Since these students would meet several times during this unit, each time would require different expectations and approaches, so for explanation's sake, let's look at what occurred during the third week's group time. By now, the students were sharing very rough "quick drafts" of complete scripts, so all were nervous about putting their first-ever plays in front of peers who already knew how very well they could write the more standard nonfiction prose of the course. I didn't expect much of anything concrete to come of this time together (II, B, 1), so I simply had them read aloud what they had written so far (II, C, 1), trusting "the feeling in their mouth and the sound in their ear" would tell them plenty, for now, about how to revise for next week (which still wouldn't be their final deadline).

Following each student's reading aloud, he or she would mainly need encouragement to go on with the writing, but by now they were all very used to giving and receiving criticism, so I limited their interaction to mainly positive feedback, allowing only minimal and global suggesting (II, D, 2; II, E, 1). Still, because play writing was a new genre for them, and they all displayed noticeable measures of insecurity, I had each author jot down his or her two main areas of concern for the current draft about which he or she would allow the group members to make tentative suggestions (II, F, 2). Since the authors did not bring multiple copies of these quick drafts, group members would merely listen as each author read and, likewise, all responses were to be oral (II, G, 1).

Then, in subsequent weeks during the same unit, the group populations and work space remained the same while many of the other features of their small-group work evolved to match the evolving purposes for interaction as they completed their plays.

The Bottom Lines

Still, no matter what I did then or do now, the main feature has simply been to have students reading their works to each other in whatever considered ways work best for them and for me. I ignorantly preached it in *English Journal* in 1981, and I bemusedly quote it today: "Student writers should be read!" (50). For, still crazy after all these years, I continue to believe that and have found my own ways to make it possible and make it work, term after term. With some willingness to experiment, so can every teacher of writing.

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