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A Composition Class That Teaches Itself: Structuring an Effective Collaborative Conversation

Celeste Resh

Until I read Kenneth Bruffee's observation that students bring resources to the class that can be pooled—if the teacher judiciously structures a collaborative conversation—my peer response groups were flops, to be honest. After a number of judicious and some not-so judicious attempts at various approaches, I eventually found an effective way of structuring a collaborative conversation. In tandem with raising the quality of the response in my developmental through sophomore level classes, this approach also reduces the anxiety common in peer feedback situations.

Before I'd been introduced to the idea of "judicious structuring," I was happy when I saw any improvement in individual papers, but I came to realize that I could expect much more. In a case study I undertook to look at the effect of responding on the responder as writer, I found evidence that responding has value not only to the receiver but to the producer of response, as well. It is as Bruffee led me to believe: with appropriate response techniques, students can, in effect, teach themselves.

It takes less than two class meetings to familiarize my students with the kind of collaborative conversation that will be expected of them. I begin

by discussing peer response and the benefits it has to both the receiver and giver of response. If they are feeling anxious about having others read and respond to their work, I explain that I will be showing them responding techniques that focus on helpful responses rather than attacks on writing. In addition, since they will be responding in writing, they will have time to produce thoughtful responses that their classmates will appreciate and be able to refer to later when they begin revising. Finally, when they meet to respond to first drafts, they'll work in a group that is half the size of the regular class which will result in a more relaxed atmosphere. I believe that the smaller group size, the helpful response technique, and the written responses help to reduce the "affective filter" caused by anxiety that Krashen recognized as interfering with language acquisition. With a reduced level of anxiety, students can effectively acquire knowledge about composing as they read their peers' writing and their peers' responses to that writing, and as they respond to each other's writing and even to each other's responses—in a judiciously structured collaborative conversation.

Explaining Peer Response To Students

Focus of Response. To begin with, I explain the four categories of writing qualities in order of importance: Ideas/content; organization/structure; wording/language; and flavor/voice. I further explain that, although spelling and mechanical considerations are important in polishing writing, they will not be addressed until the second drafts are written. When we are revising a first draft, in particular, major changes in ideas and structure are likely to occur, so it doesn't make sense to focus on spelling errors, for example, if the words might not appear in the final draft.

Form of Response. Explaining that direct critical comments seem to raise anxiety more than they lead to writing improvement, I ask students to avoid direct criticism and instead ask questions when they are concerned about something in a peer's paper. In addition, they should look for things to praise, because we usually learn more when we're told what it is we are doing right than when the focus is primarily on our errors. In addition to reducing anxiety, using praise and questions has the beneficial effect of keeping the focus on revision level concerns rather than the editing kinds of remarks that often come with the direct critical comment. A guide on how to respond to a first draft, containing samples of specific compliments and helpful questions, lets the students see concrete examples of the kinds of response they should try to give one another.

Teacher Modeling

Using a sample essay, I begin by describing the assignment for which it was written. I then read the essay to the class so they have an uninterrupted understanding of what it was about. Reading through a second time, I will model responses to the paper in the form of positive statements about parts that were particularly well written and pertinent questions about parts that were not so well done. Overhead transparencies work well for this. I prefer to use as a sample a student paper that has a variety of responses, so I can ask my students to think about which are appropriate for a first draft and which should be left until the second draft.

Student Practice

The students are given another one page essay, written for the same assignment as the first example—with a variety of problems as well as some good parts—and they are asked to practice giving written responses to it. Prior to the next class, I review these responses and model appropriate responses by writing compliments where the students are successful and asking questions about responses that were not appropriate in either form or focus, e.g., "Instead of writing the word 'confusing,' could you ask a question about the part you find confusing?" Or, if the focus of response deals with editing issues such as spelling or punctuation that do not affect the meaning of the piece, I will avoid the direct critical comment and instead ask, "Could you focus more on the development of ideas during the revision session on the first draft and postpone attention to spelling problems until we get into editing the second drafts?"

Class Arrangement

When first drafts are due, half the class brings theirs to one class meeting, and the other half brings theirs to the next. In addition to the anxiety-reducing effect of a smaller group, this arrangement allows me time for brief conferences with each student. The rest of the class uses this time to work on either their first or their second drafts.

Upon arriving on a first-draft day, students are asked to place their desks in a circle, leaving enough room between their chairs so they can get in and out easily. An empty desk sits in the center of the circle for holding papers that are placed there when students finish responding to them.

Class Activities:

Getting Started. After asking the students to be sure their names are on their papers, I go around the circle picking up the papers and then giving them to other students to get the response session started. In the infrequent event that students arrive without papers, they are asked to read over another student's shoulder rather than deprive someone else of having a paper to read.

This practice tends to encourage students to come to class with a first draft in hand. When students finish reading and responding to a paper, they place the papers on the center desk and pick up another that they have not yet seen.

Responding. To provide a helpful context for the revision response, I ask the students to provide me with a reminder of the assignment information which I'll write on the board so they can refer to it during the response session. As appropriate, I will remind them that revision response focuses on writing in terms of content and development of ideas, organization of ideas, language, and voice, more or less in that order.

Finally, I ask them to keep in mind the importance of responding with both specific praise and helpful questions. Attention to spelling and other mechanical concerns should be reserved for the editing session that will occur when they bring in their second drafts. This rule helps eliminate the kinds of anxiety-causing critical comments that crop up on first drafts when the readers don't focus on the higher level elements of idea development and organization.

Writer's Notes. In addition to writing responses on the papers of peer writers, students are also asked to keep a record of the papers they read as part of their class Writer's Notes. Beside each name they are asked to respond to a question, e.g., What was best about that writer's paper? What needed the most revision work? What was their best response to that person's paper? At the end of the class period, they are asked to write another Writer's Note in which they indicate what they will work on when they begin revising their own papers. As they do this Writer's Note, they are asked to consider the responses they received from others as well as what we talked about during our conference.

Conferring. As the students are reading and responding, I wait for them to get into the routine before I begin conferring with individuals. Sometimes I find my first conferee by going to the desk in the circle and picking up a paper that someone has just finished reading, and sometimes I use alphabetic variations, and sometimes I ask for volunteers. When I ask the authors to come up to confer, I explain that I am going to quickly read

their papers and then ask them to tell me what they know they did well and what they think they will work on as they revise. Before I do that, though, I try to give them what any writer deserves—acknowledgement either while I'm reading or afterward or both: How interesting/I didn't know that!/ What a sad moment that must have been./That gave me goosebumps!/I'll bet your parents would love to read this!/and other exclamations from laughter to shock to concern as the writing calls for it. When we're done, the paper we've been discussing is placed on the desk in the circle so others will get a chance to read and respond to it.

Having been reminded of the assignment earlier when they told me what to write on the board, and having read and responded to peer papers, most students have no trouble identifying parts of the paper that need work. It is actually more difficult to get them to start out by saying what they did well. In our conferences, I acknowledge their assessments and then add suggestions only if absolutely necessary. It frequently isn't necessary to do anything but agree. They've gotten information while reading and responding to their peers' papers, and—while I'm quickly skimming their papers—most look to see what their classmates wrote to them. Whether they think of the assessments on their own or get ideas from their classmates' responses, when they tell me what's good and what needs work, they are speaking as owners of their own writing. That feeling of ownership and the lack of anxiety that accompanies their successful collaboration is the result of a concerted effort to focus on pertinent praise and helpful questions in the first draft revision session.

In a recent developmental level composition course, the first paper one of my students wrote was about losing her cat when they went for a walk on a winter's day. In the semester's first peer response session, she received twelve responses from six different classmates. Only one focused on a minor wording issue. Six of the comments were specific praise, some as specific as "Good job on including the sight description, it's like your really there." The other five were pertinent questions which, if answered, would improve the

quality of the paper. One student asked, "Did the cat turn out OK—didn't get sick?" Another asked, "Should you tell about what you were thinking?" A third wondered, "Did you ever think Ashbee had got into it with the dog?" The writer did respond to most of those questions when she revised her paper, and her peer collaborators seemed as pleased as the author at the final results. Showing my students how to respond as interested readers and collaborators instead of as critical authorities has, to borrow from Robert Frost, made all the difference in my composition classroom.

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Appendix

How To Respond To a First Draft

You are a member of an audience who is trying to help the writers by telling them what is done well and asking questions about parts that don't work as well.

With a first draft, you'll be looking to see if the writing assignment has been followed, and you'll focus on idea development and organization, plus whether it looks like the audience for the writing is able to understand what the writer is trying to communicate. Save editing level comments (spelling and mechanics) for a later draft—when the

paper's content is more settled and it's time to polish it.

To begin, you'll read through a paper to see what it's all about. Then, you'll write your praise and questions in the margins of the papers and even on the backs of pages if you need the room. The following examples of effective praise and questions were written by English 101 students:

Praise

Compliments are given for things you see in the writing that you think are done well.

- Great intro—grabs reader's attention!
- Good backup info—very informative.
- Very good use of quotes.
- Good organization of tests.
- Very nice. I can **see** what happened.
- Nice transition!
- I like this—it keeps me in suspense.
- Good conclusion—good recommendations.

Questions

Polite, thoughtful questions don't cause hurt feelings and focus primarily on parts of the writing that need more information or aren't clear enough in some way:

- Could you maybe use a different sentence to grab the attention of the reader more?
- What ended up happening?
- Do you think these could all be related?
- What was the after-effect?
- What do you think about it now?
- Were you just talking, or screaming?
- Did the game stop? How did the fans react?
- Could you add more examples? It would be interesting.
- Could you be a little more specific on comparisons?