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Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions

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The peer response group in which students respond to one another's writing is commonly used in the writing classroom, from kindergarten through college. Although enthusiastically advocated by practitioners and supported by current theories of the teaching and learning of writing, response groups are difficult to organize effectively. This review examines the pedagogical literature on response groups, places that literature in the context of current theories of the teaching and learning of writing, and then examines the small number of studies of peer response groups. Key issues include (a) the degree of teacher control over the groups and the effects of control structures, and (b) the kinds of social interactions within groups, with attention to how those interactions relate to the larger instructional context and to teaching and learning in the groups. Suggestions are made for reconceptualizing peer response to writing, with an emphasis on moving away from the teacher-initiated and controlled response group toward encouraging spontaneous peer talk during the writing process.

The past 20 years have been for writing teachers a time of intense fermentation, reflection, and innovation. The reasons are many, resting partly in social and demographic change and partly in a professional paradigm shift generated by research into how writers write (Hairston, 1982). Practice has suggested research and research has suggested practice, but not always has there been a perfect synergy between the two. Peer response groups, warmly advocated by a number of theorists and teachers (Beaven, 1977; Bruffee, 1978; Elbow, 1973; T. Hawkins, 1976; Healy, 1980; Macrorie, 1979; Moffett, 1968; see Gere, 1987, for a complete catalog of the work on peer response groups), present an interesting case in point. Although practitioner endorsements commonly share the assumption that the writing process is somehow supported by having students gather together for the purposes of providing one another with feedback on writing, response groups have been seldom studied to illuminate just what processes are thereby supported, or how. Thus, although writing groups have assumed an important place in educational practice,

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teachers are left to reflect upon them mostly in light of their own experiences or those of colleagues. Freedman's (1987b) national survey of 560 successful teachers of writing points out that practitioners are deeply divided as to the efficacy of the small-group approach. The conflicts felt by practitioners are paralleled in the small body of research so far conducted on response groups, which has produced strongly disparate findings about their success (e.g., see Berkenkotter, 1984, and Newkirk, 1984a, for negative findings about groups as compared with Gere & Abbott, 1985, Gere & Stevens, 1985, and Nystrand, 1986, for positive findings).

Further complicating discussions of groups in the writing class is the fact that besides their most common function of responding to writing, groups may serve other functions as well. In a study of two ninth-grade writing classrooms, Freedman (1987a) found groups used in four distinct ways: for responding to writing, thinking collaboratively, writing collaboratively, and editing student writing. Most of the literature about groups in the writing class is concerned with groups that function mainly to provide students with opportunities for responding to one another's writing, including opportunities for editing.

Some who discuss response groups assume that they function for thinking and writing collaboratively (e.g., Bruffee, 1973, 1978, 1984, 1985; Gebhardt, 1980; Gere, 1987). As Gere notes,

> Writing groups are generally catalogued under the heading "collaborative learning," a form of learning that includes a variety of learner-centered activities ranging from convening small groups to solve problems in a math class to organizing book groups that meet to discuss texts selected by members. (p. 55)

In Freedman's (1987a) study of groups in two ninth-grade classrooms, however, collaborative groups are more narrowly defined. The groups that function most collaboratively are not those attending to the writing of a particular individual but, rather, those that involve working together to solve a single problem or coauthor a single text. Freedman concludes that groups function collaboratively only if the members work together on a group-owned product. She still recognizes, however, the possibility of collaborative events that may occur within the ongoing activities of response groups. Even with this more restricted definition of collaboration, some of the research on collaborative learning in general may thus serve to illuminate aspects of the teaching-learning process particular to writing response groups; but because response groups are intrinsically less collaborative than groups working together toward a single, cooperatively owned product, existing research on collaborative learning cannot fully explain response group dynamics.

Some research has examined the potential of collaborative student writing, usually with the use of microcomputers (Daiute & Dalton, in press; Dickinson, 1986; J. Hawkins, Sheingold, Gearhart, & Berger, 1982; Levin, Reil, Rowe, & Boruta, 1985; Reil, 1985). Other research argues the merits of groups organized for thinking collaboratively about problems related to writing (Hillocks, 1981, 1984, 1986). Although collaborative writing and thinking groups hold interesting potential, they present distinctly different sorts of learning-teaching occasions than do response groups in which the group members work in turn with different individuals on their individually owned products. These other kinds of collaborative groups used in writing instruction warrant further investigation, but because the questions they provoke and the approaches for examining them are of a wholly different

order, we will limit our discussion to the more commonly practiced and studied writing response group. We will discuss notions of collaboration only as they relate to the activities of the response group.

The existing confusion about response groups suggests a need not only for more research, but also for a conceptual framework to contain and inform such inquiry. The purpose of this review will be to lay a theoretic foundation for research on response groups in order to suggest questions that further studies might explore— such questions, for instance, as how response groups fit into the larger social and instructional context of the writing class, what factors internal to response groups influence how peer group learning can take place, and how students give and receive response to and from one another.

Not specific to the writing classroom, several frameworks have been proposed for classifying studies of groups in classrooms (e.g., Peterson, Wilkinson, Spinelli, & Swing, 1984; Webb, 1982). In reviewing research on connections between group processes and student learning, Webb shows that some studies relate features of the learning situation—such as ability grouping and ethnic composition in groups—to interactional patterns in the groups. She then shows that other studies relate interactional patterns—such as giving help, receiving help, and on- or off-task behavior—to individual achievement measures. Webb's framework relates the two sets of studies by tracing a path from factors that influence group process, to group processes, and then to evidence that learning has taken place. By drawing these connections, she argues for a process-product paradigm. Her approach is aligned with earlier reviews of the relative merits of different cooperative group methods (Sharan, 1980) and of the use of groups in cooperative learning (Slavin, 1980).

In introducing their collection of research on small groups (Peterson, Wilkinson, & Hallinan, 1984), Peterson and Wilkinson (1984) describe three dominant research paradigms for studying groups: the sociological, the sociolinguistic, and the process-product. The sociological paradigm is concerned with issues that affect how students are placed in groups and then the consequences of their placement (e.g., ability and ethnic groupings). The sociolinguistic paradigm describes the communicative (verbal and nonverbal) interactions among students within groups and has been used mostly to study reading groups in elementary classrooms. The process-product paradigm attempts to correlate measurable group processes with measurable outcomes. Peterson and Wilkinson argue for an integration of these perspectives and in a chapter in their volume demonstrate a combining of the process-product and sociolinguistic approaches in a study of elementary mathematics teaching (Peterson, Wilkinson, Spinelli, & Swing, 1984).

Because of the special properties of response groups used during writing instruction, these general frameworks, which are not built specifically to address issues particular to the teaching and learning of writing, must be tailored to account for the special properties of response groups in writing classrooms. The process-product model alone is insufficient. In the case of writing, this model is not easy to apply because progress in writing is difficult to measure and often occurs over extended periods of time. Even when no one-to-one relationship can be found between talk in groups and improvement on an individual piece of writing, learning might still be occurring in groups. Alternatively, even if a writer makes measurable improvement on a piece of writing that can be connected to talk in a group session, the writer may not have learned a concept that he or she can apply to a new writing

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situation. Little is known about what is involved in transferring writing skills from one task to the next. Only a sociolinguistic model leads to increased understandings of the internal dynamics of the groups and the kinds of interactions that can lead to language learning. As Peterson and Wilkinson suggest, it seems important to start with a sociolinguistic understanding of group processes and to begin to build toward product measures that are meaningful.

In order to build a conceptual framework for informing research on the use of groups in writing instruction, we will begin with theories of the teaching and learning of writing and issues specific to writing groups. More general theory on group learning will be considered in reference to issues specific to the teaching and learning of writing.

Because response groups are not a novel innovation but already an integral part of many writing classrooms, we begin by tracing their emergence in the classroom, examining the reasons commonly given for their use, and exploring issues of power and classroom control associated with the use of these groups. In the first section, we concentrate both on issues raised in the substantial pedagogical literature on groups and on issues raised in the research literature, considering the work of teachers and theorists as well as empirical studies. Our aim in this section is not to provide a critical review but instead to explicate themes of theoretic importance: the relationship of peer response groups to the process approach to teaching writing, the role of peer-based learning in the classroom, and issues concerning interactional patterns in groups as opposed to dyads.

In the second major section, we examine how Vygotsky's theory of development, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction to language learning, suggests ways that groups might support students' acquisition of written language. Vygotsky's theories suggest a close relationship between talk and writing and the importance of a research framework that leads to understanding how social interactions, in this case in the form of peer talk, can contribute to writing development.

In the third section, we provide a critical review of the small body of research on peer response groups in writing instruction. This section is organized around two key issues that emerge from the synthesis of theoretical and practical concerns: (a) the degree of teacher control over the groups and the effects of control structures, and (b) the kinds of social interactions within groups, with attention to how those interactions relate to the larger instructional context and to teaching and learning in the groups. Finally, we point to alternative conceptions of peer talk about writing and directions for future research.

Our intention is not to provide an exhaustive critical review of the literature on small-group learning, but to examine that work which contributes to a theoretic frame for organizing issues important to pedagogy and research on response groups in the writing classroom.

How Writing Groups Function in the Classroom: Issues From Practice

Groups and the Process Approach

Myers (1986) and Gere (1987) remind current practitioners that the small-group approach to writing instruction is not so new as most suppose. Gere, in her extensive history of the use of and research on writing groups, shows that "writing groups have existed as long as writers have shared their work with peers and

received commentary on it" (p. 9). She traces the history of groups in the United States back to the early days of the colonies when they were part of literary societies, documenting their use in classrooms as early as the last part of the 19th century.

Both Myers and Gere point to Sterling Andrus Leonard's Dewey-inspired textbook, *English Composition as a Social Problem* (1917), for an enthusiastic discussion of many of the same group techniques generally thought of as "new" today: Elementary-age students are to meet in groups to respond to each other's papers; they are encouraged by their teacher to invent any necessary terminology and, above all, to avoid harsh, nitpicky criticism. Embracing Dewey's vision of the school as miniature community, Leonard seeks to create harmonious, cooperative relations among students as they pursue together shared educational goals, mirroring in the process the image of an ideally functioning society. As Myers points out, Leonard's philosophy is echoed in recent works by advocates of the small-group approach, including Elbow (*Writing With Power*, 1981) and Bruffee (*A Short Course in Writing*, 1985), both of whom encourage positive, supportive interactions among writing group members, and emphasize the salutary effects of requiring small groups to push toward collective "consensus."

The philosophic underpinnings motivating the use of groups in the early part of this century and today are similar, but much has changed since Leonard's time that affects how we view groups in the writing classroom. English instructors may still be scrambling, as they were in Leonard's day, to establish their own professional status (Myers, 1986, p. 158), but the challenge presented by our rapidly expanding knowledge of how writing is best taught and learned changes the tone of the struggle. From Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1963), Hairston (1982) borrows the term "paradigm shift" to describe the change generated by the profession's new knowledge of writing and writers. According to Kuhn, disciplines are governed by conceptual models which, when threatened by emerging anomalies, are gradually forced to give way to reformed or even wholly different paradigms. Such is the case, argues Hairston, with writing instruction, as the traditional product-centered model is questioned in light of recent work by linguists, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, and composition theorists. Hairston goes on to list key features of the new paradigm: It focuses on writing as a process, with instruction aimed at intervening in that process; it teaches strategies for invention and discovery; it emphasizes rhetorical principles of audience, purpose, and occasion, with evaluation based on how well a given piece meets its audience's needs; it treats the activities of prewriting, writing, and revision as intertwining, recursive processes; and it is holistic, involving nonrational, intuitive faculties as well as reason (p. 86).

A moment's consideration of Hairston's list begins to suggest some reasons for the appeal of the small-group approach: Groups present an arena for intervening in the individual's writing process, for working collectively to discover ideas, for underscoring the writer's sense of audience, for interacting with supportive others at various points in the composing process, and even, perhaps, for developing the writer's intuition. Emig (1979), who has written a similar description of the new paradigm, underscores the important role social exchange can play in the writing process. Seen formerly as "a silent and solitary activity" with "no community or collaboration," writing is now acknowledged as a process "enhanced by working in, and with, a group of other writers, perhaps especially a teacher, who gives vital response including advice" (pp. 140–141). At this point, Emig makes a special case

for peer groups that have the particular function of responding to group members' writing.

The role small groups can play in expanding the audience for student writers is further emphasized by rhetorical theory and research findings that show the importance of writers' concepts of audience. Flower (1979), in a study of more and less successful college-age writers, finds that successful writers pay more attention to audience needs than do less successful writers. Flower's findings are based on what writers say when asked to think aloud as they write in testlike conditions. Although it is not known whether the same results would be found with younger writers, or writers writing in more natural conditions, and although thinking aloud may alter the nature of the writing process itself, one can still conclude that more successful writers, under certain conditions, are more conscious of audience than their less successful counterparts. Peer groups provide one way to make audience needs concrete and to help writers who otherwise might not focus on those needs to do so.

Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975), studying the writing process with very different research techniques, reach similar conclusions. Britton and his colleagues collected 2,122 writing samples from 500 secondary students, produced under natural conditions in British school settings. The researchers then independently coded the writing samples to indicate the audience that the students had in mind as they wrote. They found the "teacher-examiner" to be the audience for 40% of the writing produced by first-year (U.S. sixth-grade) students, increasing to 60% of the audience for seventh-year (U.S. twelfth-grade) students. Britton and his colleagues conclude by urging schools to broaden the audience for student writing so that the audience demands in school more closely match the varied writing demands in the world outside school. Peer groups could certainly play an important role in helping promote such a goal.

Besides broadening and emphasizing the audience for writing, groups have also been seen as a way to support the shift from a product to a process emphasis in writing instruction. Recent research on the writing process argues the importance of allowing students time to go through an elaborated writing process in which they have opportunities to think about their topics as well as to revise their work to meet the needs of their readers (Flower, 1979). Peer groups can play a number of roles in that expanded process. More specifically, Freedman (1987b) finds through her national surveys of successful teachers that these teachers provide for response to students' ideas and their writing throughout the writing process, not just at the time the students hand in their final versions. Peer groups can assist teachers, who are generally overworked, in providing such ongoing response to student writing.

From Process to Peer-Based Interactions: Issues of Power

As one considers how small groups support the larger goals of writing instruction, perhaps even deeper and more significant than their potential in supporting the writing process are new understandings of the role social interaction plays in the teaching and acquisition of written language. Vygotsky (1978, 1986), whose developmental theory assigns a pivotal role to social interaction, has prompted composition theorists and researchers to begin examining how working together promotes students' progress. Vygotsky's attention to social processes has helped produce a

conceptual climate wherein peer-based learning of all kinds has acquired a provoc-
ative new role.

One vocal proponent of writing groups (Bruffee, 1984) points to Vygotskian
theory as a conceptual foundation for the approach, but, as we will see, this is one
of many sketchily developed points in the pedagogic literature on groups which
warrants further discussion. Our next major section will return to the question of
how Vygotskian theory might be applied to groups and what such a framework
suggests to both research and practice, but for now we will pursue the issues of
power and control raised by the use of truly student-centered response groups.

Bruffee (1984, p. 6), a leading proponent of writing response groups, argues for
the benefits of peers' working together to foster a kind of peer-based learning that
takes power away from the teacher and puts it in the hands of the students. He
cites both Kuhn (1963) and Rorty (1979) in arguing that knowledge is not a static
given but is "socially justified," evolving as communities of "knowledgeable peers"
interact, thus shaping, extending, and reinforcing one another's ideas. It is this sort
of self-governed dynamic that we must allow our students, Bruffee (1978) argues,
if they are to discover the "social and emotional foundation upon which intellectual
work rests" (p. 462). As an example of learning based in a community of "knowl-
edgeable peers," Bruffee cites M. L. J. Abercrombie's *The Anatomy of Judgement*
(1960), a study that documents how peer influence works through a process of
group discussion to develop the diagnostic judgment of medical students at the
University of London. Bruffee has argued (1973) that, although such peer-based
learning is indeed the norm in the professions and in business, it has traditionally
been absent from the classroom—a gap that becomes even more noteworthy
considering the potent influence of peer dynamics throughout one's school years.
Without examining in any depth the nature of group tasks or interactions, Bruffee
tends to assume that all such peer-based work is collaborative.

A number of researchers, using different research paradigms and working with
students of different ages, have shown the strength of peer influence on learning.
Labov (1982), for instance, has studied the importance of peer networks in shaping
the language and value systems of inner-city adolescents. Corsaro (1985), working
with a nursery school class, and Dyson (1987, 1988), working with a combined
first/second-grade class, have conducted observational case studies of interactions
among peers in school, suggesting the increasingly important role of peer friendship
as an influence on learning. Also drawing upon data gathered through naturalistic
observation, Cooper, Marquis, and Ayers-Lopez (1982) have studied spontaneous
speech among kindergarten and second-grade children, documenting instructional
episodes initiated with varying degrees of directness by peer learners. All instruc-
tional episodes are then categorized as concerned with either "instructional issues"
(such as procedures for assignments), or "substantive issues" directly involving the
subject matter under study. Finding 79% of the learner-initiated episodes to be
concerned with substantive issues, Cooper et al. conclude "that children are viewed
by their peers as having information that is of central import in classroom learning"
(p. 189).

In a more controlled sociolinguistic study, Steinberg and Cazden (1979) have
observed seven emotionally disturbed 11- and 12-year-old children enacting "in-
structional chains" wherein one student, after receiving appropriate training, as-
sumed the task of tutoring the others on a given lesson. Steinberg and Cazden's

analysis, focusing on linguistic changes which signal a negotiation between peer and teacher roles, reveals how these students succeeded in juggling the dual demands of managing social relationships and communicating new information. These student-tutors are seen building upon their status as peers to create an effective teaching-learning environment, dealing with disruptive peers, for instance, in an effective but nonthreatening manner that eluded their regular classroom teacher.

In a study comparing fourth graders' performance on combinatory logic tasks in a laboratory setting versus a more loosely structured group activity, Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1984) discover another way in which peer interaction supports learning: by giving students an opportunity to formulate their own goals for a task rather than simply accepting goals enforced by a teacher or researcher. When given one-on-one instruction in the laboratory setting, many students fail to fully comprehend the assigned task; but when the same students are allowed to explore together a similar task—this time within the context of a higher level problem— they eventually "discover the task on their own" (p. 188), resulting in superior achievement. Although it is not clear whether peer-based learning or the context of a higher level problem (or both) is responsible for these superior gains, Newman, Griffin, and Cole conclude that the "hierarchical division of labor" (p. 188) present in the laboratory setting—as it is in the traditional classroom—obscures the learner's sense of the larger purpose and meaning of a task by removing higher level goals from his or her control. More research is needed, they suggest, to compare how the tasks are made to happen in a laboratory setting versus how they can be "made to happen in everyday situations where there is no teacher" (p. 189), but where peers may present a possible source of help for one another.

Other researchers and theorists suggest that the comfort level of peer interactions can support cognitive growth. For instance, Michaels and Foster (1985), in a study of a first-grade class's "sharing time," show how peer teaching can enhance language learning even among very young children as they play to an audience of "sympathetic but discriminating" classmates (p. 157). Social skills theorist Argyle (1976) argues that because peers share similar cognitive constructs, they can communicate more readily with one another than they can with a teacher—that although they may not know as much as their instructor, peers hold special potential to build one another's confidence, social skills, and motivation.

Although research has thus suggested various ways in which peers working together can uniquely support or complement the instructional goals of school, there is some evidence that teachers feel threatened by the sheer force of peer influence and its potential to undermine the organizational norms of school (Sieber, 1979). When advocates of writing groups point enthusiastically to the power of peer dynamics (see, for instance, Bruffee, 1978, p. 449), they often do so without reviewing the body of research which suggests ways in which this power may be productively channeled toward instructional ends. Teachers are thus left to wonder if the student-centered approach is truly practical, given the realities of classroom management and need for discipline.

Some teachers have responded to this dilemma by coming up with new ways to involve students without completely unleashing the power of peer dynamics. Graner (1987), for instance, laments the fact that "allowing students to operate in peer groups requires teachers to give up a large measure of classroom control," making it "virtually impossible for the teacher to guarantee that these discussions do not

become small talk or social chit-chat" (p. 41). He proposes as an alternative what he calls the "Revision Workshop," a whole-class lesson in which stronger and weaker specimens of student writing are compared and revision strategies discussed, with students then given an opportunity for individual, silent work on their own revisions. In emphasizing that the approach "does not require that teachers surrender any classroom control" (p. 43), Graner intends to reassure teachers that they can include the benefits of peer response in their classrooms while maintaining sole authority over its form and substance. But by denying peers the opportunity to interact as peers, constraining their feedback within the guidelines of teacher-led discussion, Graner eliminates not only the instructor's surrender of power but also the students' chance to receive feedback that truly diverges from that of a "teacher-examiner" (Britton et al., 1975). Such approaches as Graner's, while intending to solve the immediate logistical and political problems inherent in instituting a small-group approach, commonly reflect significant misunderstanding concerning the role of social interaction in the acquisition of written language.

Even instructors moving more boldly toward the use of response groups often search for ways to limit their autonomy. Indeed, how groups are framed serves as a powerful indicator of an individual instructor's theory of what it means to "teach the writing process" (Freedman, 1987b) and to interact in support of that process. Some teachers, following the tradition of Elbow (1973) or Macrorie (1979), offer only a bare minimum of guidance to groups, leaving students to devise strategies for responding to one another's writing that are largely intuitive and highly individual. Others, while interested in the potential of peer response, feel uneasy about surrendering so much classroom control to their students and continue to look for ways to guide and shape the group process. A common means of preserving some degree of teacher-centered control is the use of such procedural heuristics as lists of questions and reminders ("editing sheets") to channel response (see, for instance, Lamberg, 1980). There is evidence, however, that as much can be lost as gained by such strategies. In her study of peer groups in two ninth-grade classrooms, Freedman (1987a) finds that use of editing sheets correlates with a marked reduction of student-to-student talk. Such devices lessen the extent to which small groups are truly peer-run collectives and, in the most extreme case, move toward a mere parceling of tasks traditionally completed by an instructor, with students attending so closely to teacher-mandated concerns that groups no longer serve the function of providing a wider, more varied audience for student writing.

A teacher's use of peer groups may thus reflect a profound conceptual shift, or amount to little more than pursuing a traditional teacher-centered agenda within a parceled class. This is not to say that a teacher must turn over complete control to groups in order for them to be productive. Given the power of peer dynamics to either subvert or support educational goals, teachers' desires to monitor group activities seem reasonable indeed. The real issue is how to devise ways in which teachers and students might productively share power, but on this point the literature has been largely silent. Although a small portion of the research on group learning looks at spontaneous instructional events wherein roles shift and democratic peer teaching occurs (e.g., Cooper, Marquis, & Ayers-Lopez, 1982; Freedman, 1987a; Freedman & Bennett, 1987), far more common is study of highly structured peer engagements wherein students are trained to assume the role of teacher (e.g., Mehan, 1979; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Steinberg & Cazden, 1979). Similarly,

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practitioner endorsements of response groups have failed to address in any in-depth manner the problem of how to encourage feedback that is spontaneous and natural rather than mere mimicry of a teacher. Because response groups function within a larger instructional context, it is important to attend to ways in which the classroom as a whole can encourage or discourage peer talk during writing. From this wider vantage point, the issue of teacher-versus-student power may be envisioned anew: Peers' being empowered to interact with one another need not be seen as subtracting from the teacher's power to design, monitor, and participate in the learning environment.

Groups Versus Dyads

In examining how students learn from a peer acting as a teacher, many studies of student groups fail to chart precisely the distinctions and similarities between dyadic interactions in which a teacher or more proficient peer provides tutoring. Similarly, in the literature on writing instruction peer tutoring in dyads and group work are often mentioned together as possible alternatives to more traditional instruction, often with no substantive discussion of how much one-to-one and small-group arrangements differ in form and purpose. Sometimes training students in individual peer tutoring is seen as basically the same thing as training them to work together in groups. Bruffee (1978), for instance, refers to the essential similarity between one-on-one peer tutoring "and its classroom counterpart, the organized, progressive, collaborative peer criticism" (p. 451). Brannon and Knoblauch (1984) move toward a sharper distinction, suggesting that whereas students receiving response from groups of classmates benefit from widely ranging feedback on their writing, individual tutoring encourages more searching self-analysis of the writer's ideas and strategies (p. 45). Spear (1984) takes the argument one step further, proposing that subjection to multiple points of view in group sessions enables the writer to "anticipate other points of view and to reflect with detachment upon the value of one's ideas" (p. 74). In a review of research into peer group work around a variety of (nonwriting) tasks, Damon (1984) has noted that one-on-one tutoring seems most suitable to those situations "where there is a need for supplementary bolstering of adult instruction," whereas student groups are better suited to acquiring "basic reasoning skills" (Damon, p. 338, cites Sharan, 1984, and Slavin, 1980, on these points). Indeed, peer tutoring sets up the role of tutor and tutee, matching more closely a hierarchical teacher-student relationship than a more coequal student-student relationship.

Such general comparisons lead to the conclusion that there are major differences between one-on-one and small-group collaboration in writing instruction. While collaboration may occur in dyadic tutoring exchanges, one would suspect that peer-run collaboratives might be characterized by more complicated interdynamics. No research to date has compared interactions in dyadic tutoring with those of writing groups, and in the theoretic and pedagogic literature on the subject, the boundary between these two commonly proposed forms of collaborative learning continues to be blurred. Dyads do, however, present a useful lens through which to view the role of social interaction in the teaching-learning process; indeed, investigations of dyadic interaction have played a significant role in the development of language learning theory.

Summary

Peer response groups may not be a wholly novel innovation, but in the context of today's conceptual climate they present practitioners with newly defined opportunities and dilemmas. On the one hand, teachers embracing a process approach to writing instruction are drawn to the idea of having peers provide ongoing response to one another on multiple drafts of their work. Not only does peer response free overworked teachers from the task of providing such detailed feedback personally, but it also emphasizes and broadens the student writer's sense of audience and the role of talk during writing. On the other hand, teachers are concerned about the surrender of classroom power peer groups generally entail. Ironically, in attempting to build a teacher-mandated agenda into the structure of response groups, instructors may erode rather than enhance their potential by encouraging students to role-play the teacher instead of interacting as peers. Given the paucity of research focused specifically on response groups, teachers are often unsure as to how the power of peer dynamics might be productively channeled toward enriching the learning environment for student writers.

How Vygotsky's Developmental Theory Supports Group Work

Vygotsky's theories, which emphasize that learning is a result of social interaction, provide a framework that can usefully inform studies of learning in response groups in the writing classroom. Although his theories were developed through studies of dyadic interaction, it is possible to extend them to examine small groups (e.g., Damon, 1984; Forman & Cazden, 1985; Freedman, 1987a).

Vygotsky (1978) says that all "good learning is that which is in advance of development" (p. 89) and involves the acquisition of cognitive skills just beyond the student's independent grasp. Such learning, Vygotsky argues, is accomplished through social activity in what he calls the student's "zone of proximal development." He defines the zone as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In this zone, continues Vygotsky, lie those functions "not yet matured" but "in the process of maturation," functions that can be termed the "buds" or "flowers" rather than the " 'fruits' of development" (p. 86). Once an aspect of development comes to fruition, the child (or, indeed, the adult) is able to proceed independently. Thus, the "actual developmental zone," which can be gauged through traditional assessment procedures, gives information about development but not about potential, because "the actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively" (p. 87). Thus two students may display a similar degree of completed mental development, but their "developmental dynamics" may be quite different, allowing one to go much further than the other when both are given equal help (p. 87).

Bruner (1978) has coined the term "scaffolding" to describe the instructional strategies of the expert or "more capable peer" interacting with learners in their respective zones of proximal development. Cazden (1979, p. 11) adds a useful caution: Although the metaphor is helpful to a point, Vygotsky's theory calls for a special sort of assistance for the learner, which, rather than being completely

discarded as a scaffold is, is "replaced by a new structure for a more elaborate construction" as the developing student moves forward through the zone of proximal development, building on completed learning ("development") to pursue more complex, sophisticated tasks. Thus, although the image of a scaffold effectively captures the idea that, in Bruner's words, "the tutor or aiding peer serves the learner as a vicarious form of consciousness until such a time as the learner is able to master his own action through his own consciousness and control" (1985, p. 24), it is important to remember that Vygotsky envisioned a more dynamically inter-personal, flexible phenomenon than this term connotes.

In applying the concept of scaffolding to group interactions in the writing class, it is also important to consider the range of abilities of students attempting to enhance one another's learning. That is, although Vygotsky specified that a "more capable peer" can offer suitable supports to the learner progressing through the zone of proximal development, when students are randomly placed in groups (as is most often the case in writing classes), it is conceivable that generally weaker writers may end up offering support or advice to generally more able writers. Given the multifaceted nature of writing, it is altogether feasible that any particular student may be more astute than another in addressing a given feature of a finished text or, indeed, any feature of the process leading to the production of that text.

But although students of varying abilities may be able to offer one another helpful pointers throughout the composing process, Vygotsky's emphasis on the social nature of learning suggests that learning to write is much more than simply absorbing bits of knowledge or mastering discrete skills. Wertsch (1979a) argues that Vygotsky was more interested in "communicative social interaction" than "language systems or narrowly defined verbal phenomena," comparing this em-phasis on language as social act to Wittgenstein's "language-games," wherein "understanding an expression depends on understanding the flow of activity in which the interlocutors are engaged" (p. 5). Wertsch notes that Vygotsky's title *Thought and Language* might have been more accurately translated as *Speech and Language* to better reflect his preoccupation with the "social activity of speech," as opposed to the "structure of language systems" (p. 4).

In the United Kingdom (Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1969; Barnes & Todd, 1977, 1981) and increasingly in the United States (Cazden, 1986), researchers have turned their attention to ways in which students' conversations bring together cognitive and social aspects of language learning. Meaning is thus reenvisioned not as static given handed down by a knowledgeable instructor, but as the ever-evolving product of social interaction.

Acceptance of the Vygotskian premise that the genesis of reasoning for oneself through "inner speech" lies in social speech prompts one to embrace the importance of talk in the classroom, and, more specifically, to advocate building an environ-ment rich in peer talk. As Cazden (1986) points out, peer interaction not only provides an abundant source of conversation, but it also allows students to try out a range of roles they would otherwise be denied in the "asymmetrical" power structure of traditional student-teacher participant structures. Among themselves, Cazden argues, peers both receive and give advice, both ask and answer questions, assume the role of both novice and expert. In examining the importance of verbalizing during learning, Durling and Schick (1976) find that vocalizing to a peer is more effective than vocalizing to an experimenter, thus providing empirical

evidence of the importance of learners viewing themselves as teachers, not just as students. Freedman and Bennett (1987) have documented how groups in two ninth-grade writing classrooms afford students the opportunity to adopt different roles from those they play in whole-class interactions: A habitual follower may suddenly emerge a leader, for instance, or vice versa.

Beyond freeing students from writing to a lone audience of "teacher-examiner" (Britton et al., 1975), peer group talk about the activity of writing is thus aligned with the Vygotskian premise that writing is a deeply social act—an act that encompasses far more than the goals and conceptions of any individual instructor. The kinds of supports students can offer one another can thereby be seen as extending beyond assistance in mastering teacher-mandated goals to the rich range of communicative function that full language mastery entails.

The Social Context of Schools and Vygotsky's Theories: Tensions and Possibilities

Although Vygotsky's theories of development seem useful to understanding the teaching and learning of writing, there are as yet many gaps in our understanding of how his theories can be applied to actual teaching-learning situations. What, for instance, are the chances of this type of calibrated interaction taking hold among peers, particularly groups of peers, interacting around specimens of their writing? Greenfield (1984) has pointed out the particular difficulty of constructing and calibrating social interactions suitable to assist learners with complex tasks such as language learning. Although the cognitive challenge implied in groups working on writing has not been formally assessed, one might surmise that it constitutes a considerable social and cognitive burden.

Research indicates certain built-in impediments to teacher-structured response groups in writing classrooms. For example, Freedman (1987a, 1987b) discusses the essentially hierarchical structure of most classrooms where the premium is placed on competition and individual achievement. Theorists offer some clues, however, to what peer collaboration might look like under optimal conditions, although the picture remains rather sketchy—especially where school-based literacy tasks are concerned. Some of the existing examinations of the Vygotskian model in action do involve linguistic tasks, revealing how mothers construct language-learning supports for young children (e.g., Ninio & Bruner, 1977; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984) or how native speakers support non-native speakers (Wong-Fillmore, 1976). Although such studies provide useful illustrations, they offer no information about the cognitive and social capacities needed to interact supportively in classroom settings, nor do they address problems encountered by students (at any level) attempting to replicate early language learning in the home.

Indeed, a number of researchers indicate that social interactions that support learning—whether between teacher and student or among peers—are far less likely to occur in school-based learning. Cazden (1979), for instance, suggests that a dramatic shift will occur in children's interactional patterns as they leave the home environment and enter the classroom and that the mismatch between home and school creates interactional difficulties for children from nonmainstream communities when they enter school. Heath (1983) follows working-class and middle-class children from their home environments into the classroom and describes the nature

and consequences of differing interactional demands. She finds that the black and white working-class children whom she studied come to school with well-established narrative patterns that are different from one another, and that both are unlike those that dominate the classroom. Their learning is made difficult because the interactional environment in the classroom does not build from or understand the patterns these children learn at home. Heath shows that if teachers are sensitive to the needs of different learners and adjust classroom interactions to better account for what different learners do and do not know, students from varied backgrounds can have success in schools. The Kamehameha Early Education Program in Hawaii has come to similar conclusions in work with native Hawaiian students (Au, 1980; Au & Jordon, 1981; Au & Kawakami, 1984; Au & Mason, 1983; Calfee et al., 1981).

In their study of "reciprocal teaching," Palincsar and Brown (1984) suggest ways of getting students to assume the points of view of teachers and to take control of their learning. Teachers, working in the zone of proximal development, gradually hand over control of the task to seventh-grade students who are experiencing difficulty with reading comprehension. Given a wealth of structured, explicit instructions and extensive modeling of the prescribed strategies by an expert, the students are able to succeed in learning to pose teacher-type questions about texts with "sizeable gains on criterion tests of comprehension, reliable maintenance over time, generalization to classroom comprehension tests, transfer to novel tasks that tapped the trained skills of summarizing, questioning, and clarifying, and improvement in standardized comprehension scores" (p. 117). Because they focus fairly narrowly on mastery of isolated skills and have students closely imitate a teacher's behavior, Palincsar and Brown's seventh graders stop short of the range of problems typically tackled in writing groups; but the study is nonetheless a valuable exploration of how Vygotskian theory might begin to be translated into the practice of peer talk as teachers think about how to help peers work productively together.

Although student-centered learning may seem novel within the classroom, even the casual observer is aware that children outside school engage regularly in group problem-solving, notably without instruction or monitoring from a teacher. Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1984) show how cognitive tasks carried out individually in the classroom are often divided and approached cooperatively in after-school clubs (p. 137), a reflection of the fact that the collaborative mode—first mastered in the child's earliest, home-based learning experiences—remains the norm outside of school. Newman et al. argue that young children experience a kind of culture shock as they move from the cooperative environment of the home into the classroom, where the premium is on individual problem solving and where cooperation among peers is called cheating (p. 137).

Forman and Cazden (1985) have noted that one problem with channeling this capacity for collaborative work toward the goals of schools is that too little is known about how peers interact. So strong is our Western, industrial-society bias toward individual achievement, they argue, that neither psychologists nor educators have looked at how students "work together to produce something that neither could have produced alone" (p. 329). To compare the types of strategies that emerge when students work together or individually on a problem, Forman conducted a study in which four pairs of 9-year-olds worked together on chemical reaction problems involving combinatory logic while a control group worked individually.

On an initial posttest, dyads demonstrated striking gains over the singletons. Perhaps even more interesting are the insights into students' problem-solving patterns yielded by the study. Styles of collaboration, for instance, are of varying depths, ranging from "parallel," where students share materials and comments but fail to otherwise monitor one another's work, to "associative," where some information is exchanged about various combinations selected without any further coordination of the students' roles, to "cooperative," where students constantly monitor each other's tasks, carefully coordinating roles (p. 338). Particularly in this "cooperative" mode, students tend to argue about conflicting solutions en route to a shared one, thus fulfilling the hypothesis of Piagetian theorist Perret-Clermont (1980) that cognitive conflict serves as a "mediator between peer interaction and cognitive reorganization" (Forman & Cazden, p. 339).

But where Piaget looked for cognitive conflict to promote growth-inducing disequilibrium, Forman and Cazden (1985) argue that "he was not interested in describing or explaining social processes as a whole" (p. 340). They turn to Vygotsky for his insights into the interactional transformation of interpsychic into intrapsychic regulation that can occur among peers. Vygotsky's theories lead them to conclude that this transformation is achieved when peers assume "separate but complementary social roles" (p. 341), one student observing, guiding, and correcting while the other performs the task. Thus, the students are able to accomplish together what neither can do alone, much as if they have been tutored by a "more capable" peer. Peer dyads can allow for many of the same learning opportunities as tutoring offers, conclude Forman and Cazden, by providing an "impetus for self-reflection encouraged by a visible audience," the "need to respond to peer questions and challenges," and by requiring the student to "give verbal instructions to peers" (p. 344)—that is, to take on the cognitive challenge of role-playing the expert. Although they acknowledge that "a Piagetian perspective on the role of social factors in development can be useful in understanding situations where overt indices of cognitive conflict are present" (p. 343), Forman and Cazden suggest that "if one wants to understand the cognitive consequences of other social interactional contexts, Vygotsky's ideas may be more helpful" (p. 343).

Throughout this section, the focus has been on collaborative activity that involves students' working together to solve a group-owned problem. The very nature of the activity of individual writing and how writing gets accomplished needs further examination. Dyson (1987, 1988) has begun to explore the role of the peer collective in the composing process of the individual, showing how informal group talk can be promoted in the elementary classroom in ways that allow students time for productive collaboration as they produce individual pieces.

Piaget Versus Vygotsky

Gere (1987) discusses the consequences of Vygotskian as opposed to Piagetian theory for the study of response groups. She claims:

> In Piagetian terms, writing groups provide a means to the end of individual performance in writing, but they are finally peripheral because the essence of writing lies in the individual effort of opening the mind's locked lid. Vygotsky's insistence on the dialectic between the individual and society, however, puts peer response at the center of writing because it makes language integral to thinking and knowing. (pp. 83–84)

By contrast, Damon (1984) argues that although the Piagetian and Vygotskian models of peer instructional interaction may at first appear oppositional, they can in fact be seen as mutually complementary. In the Piagetian view, he notes, peers provide a compelling source of cognitive conflict—especially because peers speak on a similar level, usually with a directness that seems comparatively nonthreatening. (Buckholdt & Wodarski, 1978, have similarly suggested that students learn more readily in interactive groups because peers can easily understand one another's language.) Because peer feedback is taken seriously, peer disagreements readily produce both social and cognitive conflict, which pressures peers to become aware of views other than their own, to reassess the validity of their own points of view, and to learn to justify their opinions and communicate them to others (see Johnson & Johnson, 1979, for an empirical study demonstrating the importance of interpersonally induced conceptual conflict in group learning). In contrast to Vygotskian theory, the Piagetian framework, as illustrated currently in the Geneva school by researchers such as Doise and Mugny (1981), emphasizes peer interaction as a trigger for change in that cognitive dissonance may set the learning process in motion; growth is seen as the product of restructuring the child's internal reasoning processes. Damon notes that, on the other hand, a Vygotskian view of peer interaction stresses the gradual internalization of intellectual processes (such as verification, spontaneous generation, and criticism) that are activated as peers communicate with one another. Vygotskian theory thus promotes the view that "peer feedback not only initiates change" but also "shapes the nature of change itself" (Damon, p. 333).

Although we agree with Damon that the Piagetian and Vygotskian frameworks for viewing group learning are not in all instances incompatible, we hold that they present distinctly different views of the teaching-learning process. On the one hand, Piaget (1970) asserts that social interaction plays a role in promoting learning, but that it is necessarily secondary to development: "The very fact that the stages follow the same sequential order in *any* environment," he writes, "is enough to show that the social environment cannot account for everything" (p. 721). Vygotsky (1978), on the other hand, assigns a much more profound significance to the "social environment" that Piaget downplays: "Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes," he writes, "that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 90). In Piaget's view, development leads learning; in Vygotsky's view, learning leads development, and does so through the mechanism of social interaction. Despite Piaget's impressive contributions to cognitive theory, Vygotsky speaks more directly to the issue of how social interaction facilitates learning, and assigns it a central role indeed.

The contrast between Piagetian and Vygotskian theory is further highlighted in their differing definitions of what each terms "egocentric" speech and what Vygotsky's followers term "private" speech (Wertsch, 1979b). In Piaget's use of the term, "egocentric" speech indicates a child's inability to consider the needs of others. It precedes social speech, which is "de-centered," and allows the speaker to account for an audience. Egocentric speech is indicative of learners still adrift in their own narrow, presumably unchallenged views. At most, group interaction might provide an antidote to such egocentrism by promoting cognitive conflict that the learner then works out alone, ultimately restoring equilibrium.

Vygotsky (1978), on the other hand, sees children's private speech as "the transitional form between external and internal speech" (p. 27). All speech is social; therefore, private speech is "embedded in communicative speech" and functionally is a precursor of and "the basis of inner speech" (p. 27). Thus, whereas Piaget argues (1959) that these egocentric utterances constitute a self-directed "soliloquy" (p. 256), which disappears as the child becomes socialized, Vygotsky (1986) hypothesizes that "egocentric speech is actually an intermediate stage leading to inner speech" (p. 32). Vygotsky argues that this private speech, rather than simply dying out, "'goes undergound'" (p. 33) as it is transformed into "inner speech," that is the raw material for independent reasoning.

In discussing Vygotsky's view of private speech, Wertsch and Stone (1985) note an intriguing anomaly that has some bearing on talk in writing groups: Before children fully appreciate that private speech can serve a "self-regulative" function as collaboration yields to autonomy, learners may continue producing such speech in "potentially communicative settings" for a time (p. 172). Such talking to oneself in the presence of others, far from reflecting Piagetian egocentrism, is seen as indicative of cognition's social roots. Although Vygotsky developed this aspect of this theory in response to his observations of young children, an important part of the work of writing groups emerges as a striking parallel. A teacher studied by Freedman (1987a) articulates the often-heard concern: "I want kids to *HEAR* their own writing," she asserts. "Other kids' suggestions can be an added benefit, but I really want them to hear their own work, critically" (p. 12). Such activities as listening metacognitively to one's own work or "thinking aloud" in the presence of others—activities more accurately described as "self-monitoring" rather than communicative—can be linked theoretically to Vygotsky's view of the child's private speech. In her study of response groups, Freedman found that this kind of self-monitoring occurred regularly as ninth grade students read their writing aloud to others.

An additional tension between Vygotskian and Piagetian theories arises from Piaget's emphasis on cognitive conflict versus Vygotsky's emphasis upon cooperation. Although it seems rather obvious that both might be of benefit, pedagogic literature advocating the use of writing groups continues to stress the supposed importance not only of cooperating but reaching consensus. In a recent *College English* article, Wiener (1986) echoes this argument, suggesting that where group members fail to achieve consensus, collaboration gives way to a mere delegating of traditional tasks (p. 55). Citing Bruffee's (1985, p. 45) prescription that tasks lead to "an answer or solution that can represent as nearly as possible the collective judgement and labor of the groups as a whole," Wiener stresses that a push toward ultimate agreement should be clearly implicit in all assigned tasks. According to Wiener, although the teacher should keep a distance from the students' collaborative workings, as the class meets once again as a whole, the teacher's job becomes one of helping students synthesize apparent contradictions among the conclusions reached by various groups (p. 58). Meanwhile, Myers (1986), one of the few theorists to challenge this emphasis upon consensus, argues that many of the popular appeals for collaborative learning—whether spearheaded by Leonard in the last century or Elbow and Bruffee in this one—encourage conformity to the status quo by stifling ideological differences. "Bodies of knowledge cannot be resolved into a consensus," he writes, "without one side losing something" (p. 167).

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Vygotsky does not claim that the process of reaching consensus is a necessary feature of group cooperation. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether such consensus may be construed as an index of group cooperation. Disagreement among group members, whether resolved or unresolved, marks an instance where Piagetian theory complements Vygotskian theory without necessarily contradicting it. When student writers disagree, they are not only encouraged to reconsider and deepen their positions, but are confronted with a larger dilemma: that readers (even readers who are also writing instructors) hold differing positions of what constitutes quality writing, that a text embraced enthusiastically by one may be rejected by another. One commonly stated rationale for implementing writing groups is that students need to develop a sense of audience, and some disagreement is of course a hallmark of almost any audience numbering more than one. As students model for one another the disparate response that mirrors feedback in the world outside the English class, they provide a socially based learning support that is aligned with Piaget's notion of cognitive dissonance but not at all in opposition to a Vygotskian framework. Indeed, such a "microaudience," in challenging students to negotiate between receptivity and adherence to authorial intention (see Berkenkotter, 1984), could indeed function as an interactive support. Urging students to reach premature or inappropriate agreement may short-circuit this process, imposing unnatural constraints on the human penchant for argument. It is through "collective argument," Vygotsky (1981) notes, that "the higher functions of child thought at first appear" (see Genishi & DiPaolo, 1982, for a sociolinguistic examination of the role of argument in preschool education); and there is ample reason to believe that argument, whether resolved or not, continues to play an important role in a writer's growth. In a recent study of fourth and fifth graders writing collaboratively on microcomputers, Daiute and Dalton (in press) find that both resolved and unresolved conflicts correlate with individual gains in writing ability as the students learn together to play and experiment with language.

Though consensus may play a relatively more important role where one text (as in collaborative writing) or one solution (as in joint problem solving) is the goal, the importance of pushing toward agreement may still be overstressed. Certainly, where the context is the more common paper response group, this mistaken emphasis on consensus brings into focus a larger confusion regarding how student collaboration is to function.

Research on Peer Response Groups

Introduction

Given their relatively recent surge in popularity, response groups have as yet been the subject of only a small body of empirical literature, some of which is constricted by a rather narrow frame of vision. Because issues of classroom power figure so prominently in the use of response groups, it is particularly important that researchers consider the relative degrees of teacher versus student control which characterize specific instances of group work. Further, because Vygotskian theory suggests a close correspondence between the nature of interaction and learning occurring in groups, there is a need for careful analysis of the internal social dynamics of groups. Both issues are directly tied to the agenda and style of the

classroom as a whole, further underscoring the efficacy of examining groups within a larger instructional milieu.

Of the many ways writing teachers set up response groups, each structure may influence how members of a group will interact and what kind of feedback will be offered; correspondingly, how groups are framed will influence the findings from research. For instance, strategies designed to retain a degree of teacher control will impact importantly on group dynamics, thereby suggesting a number of consider-ations: Is student attention channeled toward certain features of the texts by specific, teacher-generated guidelines, or do students look more generally for features that bother or impress them as individuals? Are students directed to address the various components of evaluation in a particular order, and with a particular emphasis? Are they to look only at the ideas and issues presented, or attend at some point to more mechanical concerns such as syntax, style, spelling, and punctuation?

In terms of internal dynamics, it is important to look at the relationship between various teacher-imposed control structures and the social interaction in groups. For instance, if groups are given directives, is the broader social context of the classroom one that ensures that these teacher directives will be followed? What is the effect of directives that are followed on social interaction? For example, is student feedback to be presented orally, in writing, or both? How much interaction is there around different topics? What about passive group members? Should everyone, as Perl and Wilson (1986) suggest, be required to give at least some feedback on each paper? What if no one can think of anything to say?

Our consideration of how Vygotskian theory might inform the pedagogic contro-versy surrounding writing response groups directs particular attention to these issues of teacher versus student control and the nature of social interaction in groups. Therefore, the following discussion of research on response groups will examine each study in terms of how it considers aspects of classroom organization that affect the nature of the interaction within groups and in terms of how it considers issues internal to the workings of the groups themselves.

Review of Research

Gere and Stevens (1985) and Gere and Abbott (1985) compare writing group language across fifth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade levels. Although they do not study the context for the groups or issues of control, they do say that the groups they studied follow the same format, modeled on Elbow's "teacherless" writing class. The teachers in the study learned the technique when they participated in Writing Project workshops. In the groups, drafts are to be read aloud twice, with group members listening the first time, taking notes the second time (no one besides the writer has access to a written version of the essay), and then offering oral response.

The focus of the Gere and Stevens and Gere and Abbott studies is on the internal workings of the groups. They record naturally occurring group sessions on audiotape and later transcribe them. Each "idea unit" of talk (Chafe, 1980) is then coded to indicate whether it "informs," "directs," or "elicits," and to indicate whether it reflects a focus on the group itself or the paper under discussion. Gere and Stevens find that the most commonly occurring idea unit "informs" group participants about the content of the writing being discussed. The study offers reassuring

evidence to teachers that response groups receiving fairly minimal guidance are capable of staying on task. Beyond that, Gere and Stevens argue that student talk tends to be far more specific to a particular text than are teachers' written comments. Since they did not study teachers' comments, the basis for the comparison remains unclear. They claim, though, that teacher comments "may be said to attempt to form student writing by conforming it, that is, by trying to realize its potential similarity to a paradigm text by asking the writer to conform to certain abstract characteristics of 'good' writing" (1985, p. 101). Students' comments, on the other hand, are found to be attentive to the writer's intended meaning, "a meaning which is often compounded of a variety of questions, comments and criticisms of quite different 'interpreters' who may each find a different 'meaning'" (p. 103). Gere and Stevens conclude that student response is thus not only more specific, but richer and more varied than teacher feedback alone.

Gere and Abbott (1985) find further that grade level affects the topics students discuss in groups, with younger students attending more to content and with older students attending more to form. Further, discussions of narrative as opposed to expository texts influenced the topic of discussion, with narratives evoking more discussion of content and with exposition evoking more phatic comments. They also found that older students talking about expository texts spend less time "informing" group members about the content of the writing.

In neither Gere study does the coding system allow the researchers to examine the nature of the interaction among the students, because the talk of each speaker is coded as a unit of meaning, not as it functions as part of an interactional sequence of meaning-making.

Nystrand (1986) and Nystrand and Brandt (in press) studied 250 students participating in 13 college-level classrooms, some centering solely around group work and completely student-centered and others teacher-centered and not using writing response groups. Although these studies do not explicitly address issues of control, they do discuss both the context and interactional dynamics of the response groups examined. Nystrand's (1986) approach follows a process-product model, in which he compares the relative success of the different classroom structures by measuring student improvement across the semester. He finds that students who work in groups evidence greater gains in their writing of personal essays than those who do not and that those who work in groups come to conceptualize revision as reconceptualization, whereas those who do not conceptualize it as editing. Nystrand also offers an interesting analysis of essential differences in how different types of groups deal with problems, adding a detailed analysis of the internal group dynamics for five of the groups across the semester. Some groups, for instance, seem to consider their task complete once they summarily label a general problem, failing to examine the trouble source in any great detail. Other groups talk at length about ideas—a potentially useful strategy if the writer needs help finding a focus, but which more often leads students off the subject. He associates group success with whether students all have photocopies of the writing under discussion. He finds that when group members both listen to a paper being read aloud and follow along on a copy of the written text, they are more likely to attend to higher order considerations (such as structure and presentation of the paper's central argument), whereas merely listening results in more attention to lower order problems (such as word choice). He finds that successful groups focus discussion on issues of genre,

topic, and comment. Nystrand asserts that the best groups are characterized by "extensive collaborative problem solving," where the group joins together in addressing one rhetorical problem after another in a concrete and cooperative manner, thus creating an environment—not unlike that of initial language acquisition—in which the learner continuously tests hypotheses about the possibilities of a written text. Nystrand argues that such groups serve an important function in helping students "anticipate potential trouble sources *as they write* [emphasis in the original]" and "develop a sensitivity to the possibilities of text, which effectively enables them to monitor their composing processes" (pp. 210–211).

In an extension of this work, Nystrand and Brandt (in press) connect talk in groups to student revisions. They collected drafts and revisions from students in both types of classes, asking the students to also describe what they would like to revise after they wrote their first draft. After they had completed their revisions, the students were asked "to assess both the strengths and weaknesses of their revisions" (p. 7). Trained raters found that students who worked together in groups produced "higher quality" revisions and were more aware of their needs and accomplishments than those who received only teacher feedback. In addition, the overall quality of the revised piece of writing was judged better for students who were in classes in which they worked in groups. Nystrand and Brandt also expand the analysis of the five students whose groups were videotaped and connect the group talk to the students' subsequent revisions. They conceptualize the "conversations and revisions in terms of 'entry points'" (p. 12). In other words, they ask, "At what level of text did the peer group 'enter' a draft under consideration and, likewise, at what level of text did the writer 're-enter' the text during revision?" (p. 12). The analysis of the talk in terms of genre, topic, and comment is expanded to the revisions. They found that they could predict the revision based on the talk, with the extent of the discussion predicting the extent of the revision and with talk on one level of text tending to implicate changes at other levels. They also found that the most common entry point was genre.

Unlike Gere's analysis, Nystrand's allows an examination of the interactive nature of talk in the groups. Nystrand is also clear that the groups occur in a student-centered context. He describes the context as follows:

> Students . . . meet regularly in groups of four or five, and the same groups meet three times a week over the course of the term for the purpose of sharing and critiquing each other's writing. The instructor assigned few if any topics and gives students no checklists to use in monitoring their discussion. Rather, students keep journals and prepare pieces of exposition from these notebooks for presentation to classmates at every class meeting. Students are required to prepare a new paper or a substantial revision for each class. They are instructed to consider the extent to which the author achieves his or her purpose; they are to avoid checking spelling, punctuation, and usage; and they are required to provide each member of their group with a photocopy of their work. Periodically the instructor collects the best papers from each student for evaluation, but she does relatively little direct instruction, and intervention in these groups is minimal. (1986, p. 180)

Other smaller scale, naturalistic studies of college-level peer response groups contradict Nystrand's thesis. Limited not only in size but in their failure to consider the context and internal dynamics of writing groups, these studies nonetheless raise some provocative cautions that warrant further exploration. Newkirk (1984a,

1984b), for instance, questions how well peer feedback supports the goals set by a writing teacher. In his study, 10 students at the University of New Hampshire were evaluated by 10 teachers and peers on four different writing tasks. Striking differences emerged between teacher and student feedback, and, in contrast to Nystrand's findings, Newkirk finds student responses lacking in a number of ways. First, his analysis reveals that strong peer identification among the students makes them more willing than their teachers to fill in missing elaboration as they read, thus rendering them more tolerant of what the teachers consider thin or undeveloped prose. Second, the students tend to reward a rather clumsy attempt at extended metaphor in one paper on the assumption that it is the sort of thing their teachers would like. Finally, Newkirk points out key differences in reader stance—the teachers were more often willing to put aside personal opinion and help students express their own ideas, whereas the student respondents tended more fully to indulge their own opinions and idiosyncrasies, sometimes simply rejecting an idea rather than helping a writer better express it. Based on his findings, Newkirk concludes that in asking students to write for their peers, teachers may not be giving them the best preparation for school writing. He acknowledges a dilemma: On the one hand, if students are told to consider audience but then allowed to write only to the academic community, cynicism may be fostered; on the other hand, if peer feedback is "vetoed" in teacher evaluations, the value of student collaboration may be lost. Newkirk argues that the answer lies in careful demonstration of response strategies before peer sessions take place, and in helping students realize that they are in the role of apprentices, not experts. Although teachers should listen carefully to student responses and not assume misreading, Newkirk maintains that they should also be aware that student response can diverge from teacher intent in unpredictable and what some would consider unsatisfactory ways.

Indeed, where group work is seen as a parceling of tasks normally completed by the teacher, any digressions from a given instructor's response norms might be seen as a major flaw; but where groups are conceived as having a more fully collaborative life of their own, providing an extended social context in which to give and receive feedback, failure to match a teacher's response mode perfectly does not present such a consuming concern. Also, the kind of peer response that grows over time in the setting Nystrand describes is likely to be qualitatively different from the kind of response an individual student gives when suddenly presented with a piece of writing. It becomes difficult to interpret Newkirk's findings in relationship to the context of the peer response group.

In another study of college-level response groups, Berkenkotter (1984) examines the sometimes confusing task student writers face in reconciling their own imperatives with the suggestions of others. In case studies of three students in her freshman composition course, Berkenkotter finds that each responds differently to reader feedback, depending on the individual writer's "personality, level of maturity, and ability to handle writing problems" (p. 313). She collected think-aloud protocols from the students as they were composing and revising as well as tape recordings as they worked in groups and met one-on-one with her. She does not analyze the talk in the groups, nor does she attempt to connect the student writing in any systematic way to the work in the groups. In her descriptions of the students, she relates that one abrasively resisted others' suggestions; another maintained inner-directed control of her text despite confusing suggestions by her group; a third was

so responsive to the sometimes hypercritical feedback of her group that she lost sight of her real purpose for writing, regaining it only as she began to take a more adversarial stance toward her group. Stressing that we do not yet know much about the process by which students gain authority over their texts, Berkenkotter urges caution in classroom use of peer response groups, where the interplay of "subtle emotional and intellectual factors" can leave some students feeling more confused than enlightened (p. 318). Because Berkenkotter provides no information about how the peer groups functioned in relationship to the rest of the instructional context, it is unclear whether they were teacher or student controlled. Berkenkotter also provides no detailed analysis of the inner workings of the groups.

In an ethnographic study of two ninth-grade writing classes, Freedman (1987b) looks at how peer groups function within learning environments informed by diverging instructional theories. In addition to providing the context for the groups, she presents a detailed analysis of the talk in the groups (Freedman, 1987a; Freedman & Bennett, 1987). In one classroom, the teacher depended on peer response as central to her teaching; from no other source in the classroom context could students get substantive help during the writing process. Overall, the teacher did not relinquish control of the groups; she gave them specific directions and had group members complete sheets she prepared for assessing one another's work. An analysis of the patterns of the talk in the groups shows that the students were oriented to the teacher and the teacher's tasks rather than to one another's writing. They were as concerned with completing the sheets in a way that would please the teacher as they were with interacting with one another. They refused to offer evaluative commentary. In the end, rather than serving as a comfortable setting where students could collaborate, these groups functioned more as a time for individual writers to complete teacher-given tasks. On a more positive note, however, the students read their work aloud and at that point they showed evidence that they reflected on their writing and anticipated what their peers were thinking. In this sense, they were becoming aware of the needs of the reader.

The other teacher in Freedman's study did not rely on peer response during the writing process. Although this teacher used groups frequently, he set them up mostly as forums where students could work collaboratively to solve a specific problem he posed to the group—such as finding support for a character's traits in a piece of literature. When this teacher did set up response groups, students spent much time off task. The students in his class had frequent one-to-one conferences with their teacher about their writing.

In both classrooms there was plentiful social interaction during writing. It is important to remember that the peer group is not the only arena for such interaction. Freedman (1987a) and Freedman and Bennett (1987) make no attempt to connect the student writing to talk in the groups; however, in two case studies, one from each classroom, Freedman (1987b) does show how students' writing grows in relation to the entire stream of social interaction in the instructional environment.

Along with Freedman and Bennett (1987), Hillocks (1981, 1984, 1986) emphasizes that groups in writing classes serve widely varying functions. He categorizes instructional approaches that rely on small groups as either "natural process" or "environmental" and argues that the two use small groups toward different ends. Hillocks places in the natural process mode those classes where students are given

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little or no direct instruction in the qualities of good writing; students in such classes may meet often in response groups, but they are given broad instructions and asked ultimately to come up with their own criteria for commenting. Nystrand's student-centered approach would likely fall here. Classes in the environmental mode, though also featuring high levels of peer interaction, structure small-group discussions toward solving well-defined problems relevant to particular features of the writing process. According to Hillocks, a typical environmental activity might consist of a teacher's first leading "a brief discussion of student writing, helping students apply a set of criteria to it," then asking students to "apply the same criteria to other pieces of writing, not only judging the piece but generating ideas in response to several questions about it in order to improve it" (1984, p. 144). Although students learn identifiable writing skills in environmental mode class-rooms, the lesson comes through interactive problem solving—not through listening to presentational-style lectures. A classroom in Hillocks's "individualized" mode and in his "presentational" mode, with its emphasis on teacher-led discussion and lecture, would be unlikely to include small groups at all. Hillocks finds, through a meta-analysis of 29 experimental studies, that of the four modes the environmental is the most productive (1984, p. 147)—a finding that raises certain concerns about the wide use of natural-process-style response groups, where students are turned loose upon the rather far-reaching, often ill-defined task of commenting on one another's work. Hillocks's results, however, are difficult to interpret. He reports a lack of homogeneity among the different natural process studies in his meta-analysis ($H = 23.15$ as opposed to $H = 12.83$ for environmental classrooms) (1984, pp. 196–197). As Witte (1987) points out, the meta-analysis is based on measurable improvement on a scale of writing quality, but the nature of the scale may differ across studies (p. 206). Furthermore, Hillocks's inferences about the mode of instruction actually used in the studies are questionable. As Larson (1987) asks, "How accurately can one suggest that the teaching one sees fits approximately (let alone tightly) into one of the four categories?" (p. 209). According to the theoretical frame we have put forth, the instructional mode would not be the key variable; rather, the degree and type of social interaction would. Hillocks provides no information about the extent to which the instructional mode correlates with particular kinds of social interactions.

Certainly, Hillocks's findings in favor of a more structured approach are contra-dicted by Nystrand's research. Nystrand demonstrates that student-centered group teaching at the college level can be highly effective. Newkirk and Berkenkotter, meanwhile, demonstrate that at this level peer influence can as easily subvert as support educational goals, a conclusion supported by numerous anthropological studies of schooling (for an overview and discussion of these, see Sieber, 1979). The problem of how to channel the power of peer influence effectively thus emerges, and herein lies a central issue: Although "collective forms of pupil behavior" have been seen as "intrusive elements in the school, obstructive to the accomplishment of its formal goals" (Sieber, p. 208), collaborative learning advocates urge teachers to relinquish a large chunk of their power to independently functioning peer groups. Some teachers attempt to qualify this surrender by prescribing tightly knit, carefully detailed guidelines to groups (for instance, asking response groups to answer a series of questions about each paper rather than simply discussing whatever seems most important to them as in the Freedman study). The issue of teacher versus student

control is complicated further by the traditional grading system. As Gere and Abbott (1985) and Freedman (1987a) point out, asking secondary and elementary students to provide independent response to each other's papers does not necessarily reduce the importance they attach to the grades they will eventually receive from a teacher. The Nystrand studies offer the only clear evidence of what happens when the teacher truly surrenders control to the students, and it is important to remember that his study is at the college level. By contrast, Hillocks (1981, 1984, 1986), in advocating the use of groups within an "environmental mode" classroom, argues for teacher control of a particular type.

A number of questions remain unanswered about the nature of collaborative learning in general and peer response in particular. More studies are needed of the actual functioning of peer talk within writing classrooms, with full descriptions of the classrooms themselves and how classroom structures relate to peer structures. In particular, such studies need to consider the larger instructional context as well as the internal dynamics of groups themselves. Because groups are so enmeshed in the larger world of the classroom—its power dynamics and social structure, its patterns of communication, its overarching instructional agenda—they must ulti- mately be studied within that context as they both help shape it and are in turn shaped by it. Important questions include the following:

- How does peer talk about writing function in the writing classroom?
- How does peer talk fit the rest of the instructional agenda?
- When talking together, how do students give and receive response and support?

Answers to such questions could begin to show (a) the influence on group function from the larger instructional context that is created by a teacher's philos- ophy of teaching writing, (b) actual patterns of students' communicative interac- tions during group sessions, (c) ways that social dynamics within peer groups influence the ways that students approach academic tasks in groups, and (d) ways that students solve intellectual problems.

Conclusion

Whereas some practitioners continue to endorse response groups as an ideal means of broadening and emphasizing students' sense of audience throughout the composing process, others are expressing misgivings about their efficacy and, more specifically, the dispersal of centralized power they generally entail. Meanwhile, theories of development present some compelling arguments for how peer talk might support the writing process, with the Vygotskian perspective in particular suggesting the benefits of a more richly interactive classroom environment than that provided by the traditional, teacher-dominated norm. To bring together the experience of practitioners and the vision of theory, research is needed that not only provides more information about what goes on in various types of peer interactions but also fosters conceptually grounded understandings of how peer dynamics can support the larger goals of writing instruction.

In thinking about peer talk in support of writing development, we need first to delineate the larger rationale for engaging peers in the process of giving and receiving feedback. The Vygotskian view of writing as a deeply social, necessarily flexible act can not only inform empirical explorations of peer response to writing but can also help practitioners productively reframe their concerns about the role of peer

dynamics in the teaching-learning process. Where use of peer response is not accompanied by a philosophic shift that suggests the benefits of peers' working and talking together in a manner that is at once academically serious and supported by the peer structure, writing instructors will always feel frustrated at the failure of peers to perfectly mirror the substance and style of teacher feedback. Learning to write is, of course, more than learning to write for a teacher, demanding as it does an ever-shifting, complex negotiation between writers and their particular audiences. Ironically, although this realization has prompted practitioners to introduce response groups into their classrooms, the tendency has been to undermine their potential by channeling peer dynamics toward teacher-mandated guidelines, thereby subtracting from the process the crucial element of student empowerment and denying group members authority to become decisionmaking writers and readers.

Ultimately, the success of peer response to writing lies in issues broader and deeper than the simple retention or surrender of teacher power. Indeed, a Vygotskian vision of individual development suggests a cooperative environment wherein power is productively shared—a classroom that could more properly be called a resource room, its teacher more properly a knowledgeable coach, its students more properly one another's colleagues. Learning in such an environment becomes less a matter of following teachers' directives and more a matter of teachers and students mutually engaged in talking and reading and writing, in giving and receiving feedback across varied audiences and at varied points in the writing process.

Because the classroom filled with student talk represents a marked departure from what has long been the American norm, it requires a revolution not only in the teacher's concept of language learning, but also in the home and school communities that shape students' ideas concerning what it means to be in school. The current interest in group learning notwithstanding, traditional attitudes hold powerful sway, inappropriate expectations constricting our sense of what is possible and most productive. A case in point is Emig's (1979) story of an evaluating administrator who postponed his visit to a classroom where students were talking in small groups, explaining to the teacher that he would return when she was "teaching"—teaching, that is, in the sense of lecturing and tightly controlling, strategies still most expected and therefore accepted, but of limited usefulness.

Peer response groups represent a step toward allowing student talk its due role in fostering the writing process, but, given the philosophical assumptions that still permeate most classrooms, such groups are but a small movement in this promising, still largely unrealized direction. Tensions abound between what groups are purported to offer and how practitioners frame them; too often, what is termed "peer interaction" amounts to little more than teacher-initiated, teacher-controlled episodes in which students follow explicit directives and take turns role-playing their instructor. At best, such interaction is a kind of conspiracy geared less toward communicating peer-to-peer than pleasing a teacher and thereby achieving satisfactory grades. Thus, in many classrooms where response groups are present, the gathering of chairs into small circles leaves the traditional conceptual landscape essentially untouched.

An occasional peer response episode does little to create a larger environment offering ongoing social supports for writers. As long as students are directed to share their work at a day and time arbitrarily deemed appropriate by a teacher,

much of the recursive, organic nature of the writing process is obscured. Indeed, the isolated opportunities for peer talk that response groups offer may not always provide the most timely or effective support for developing writers. What if a student would rather read a given piece to a teacher? What if a student prefers to work alone? What if a student isn't ready to share a specimen of writing on the appointed day? What if response is needed earlier, as ideas are just beginning to form, as the first tentative words emerge?

Ideally, peer talk about writing should occur in an environment that is flexible and attentive to the role of individual differences and that fosters communication about issues of genuine significance to students—a workplace organized and guided by a teacher, but offering the writer opportunities to solicit feedback from peers as well as from the teacher in support of one's evolving, individual needs.

In a collaborative classroom, teaching springs free of its traditional connotations, shedding the urge to dominate in favor of a less intrusive monitoring and shaping. If peer interactions in support of the academic work of writing are to take root and flourish, they must be grounded in a theoretic foundation that embraces this distinctive vision of the teaching-learning process, which allows instructor and students to take their respective places as members of a diversified community of learners—dynamically interactive and, like the business of becoming a writer, forever in process.

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