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Teaching Writing with Peer Response Groups. Encouraging Revision. ERIC Digest.

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Teachers have turned their classrooms into communities of learners, as the focus of writing pedagogy shifts from written products to writing as a process, and as ways of making knowledge--including writing--are viewed from a collaborative or social

perspective (Bruffee, 1983; Faigley, 1985). Writing instruction in our classrooms reflects a growing appreciation for the value of talk. By implementing peer writing groups, teachers encourage students to give, seek, and react to oral feedback among themselves as they write, in addition to reacting to the teacher's traditional comments on finished papers. This trend raises the interesting question of what effect peer feedback has on students' revision practices.

Respected teachers and writing theorists have fostered peer groups in high school and college classrooms as a way to encourage students to write and revise. Elbow (1973) promoted the use of "teacherless writing groups"; Murray (1982) recommended that teachers train students to respond constructively to writing in process; Macrorie (1984) discussed the value of creating a "Helping Circle"; Moffett (1983) suggested that teachers teach students to teach each other; and Bruffee (1983) maintained that getting students "to talk through" the task of writing is a form of collaborative learning that is essential. Using peer response groups, with even young writers, brings positive benefits, according to the descriptive classroom studies conducted by Graves (1983; 1984) and Calkins (1982; 1983).

PEER REACTIONS OFTEN SEEM TO HELP YOUNG WRITERS

Hence, writing groups, whose activity is sometimes referred to as "peer conferencing" or "peer collaboration," have become a pedagogical tool in a wide-range of teaching/learning contexts. It should be noted that teachers sometimes have peer groups respond in writing to written drafts from their fellow students. (See, for example, Wauters, 1988). But more commonly, collaboration provides writers with an opportunity to read their drafts aloud and to discuss them face-to-face with a peer audience while the written product is taking shape. Classroom talk can be a positive aspect in supporting all phases of the writing process (Reid, 1983). Small groups can help apprehensive or blocked writers become more fluent and can provide an audience that assists the writer in revising (Legge, 1980).

Research indicates that students writing without reactions from a writing group often do not anticipate an audience. A comparative study of freshman writers and professional journalists (Wooten, 1981) revealed that the journalists thought of their audience and readers more than the students did. The study concluded that students need audiences in addition to the teacher/grader. Cooperative writing workshops help students discover audience, according to one study of college freshmen (Glassner, 1983).

Some reports support the use of writing groups for encouraging revision. An ethnographic study concerned with talk in a high school classroom community examined whether writers' intuitions and revision strategies, among other things, could be "strengthened within a supportive classroom environment." (Kantor, 1984, p. 75). The study concluded that the development of a peer community fostered growth from

egocentrism to audience awareness and that knowing the audience helped students become more aware of possible strategies for revising the written message.

Ziv (1983) found a pattern in the way the interaction in peer writing groups develops. Early in the semester, students' comments were primarily positive, but included some criticisms of content and form. The writers, however, did not always revise accordingly to the reactions of their peers, and sometimes resented the criticisms. Later in the semester, however, advice from peers was more likely to be heeded because rather than more general criticisms, the students offered each other concrete suggestions for revision.

SOME STUDIES INDICATE MIXED EFFECTS

Not all the studies of peer reaction show unqualified positive effects on revision, however. Some studies suggest negative consequences as well. Gere and Stevens (1985) looked at a fifth-grade writing class to determine if the oral responses provided by groups to individual writers shaped the subsequent revisions in what they were writing. The study found both positive and negative results. Student writers were challenged by their peers "to clarify, to provide more detail" (p. 95) as the peer reactors asked questions when they were confused, and suggested ways to improve the writing. Some student writers integrated their peers' suggestions into subsequent revisions. Yet there were incidents of unproductive even hostile verbal exchange, and in some groups students hurried through the group work in a "robotlike monotone."

A case study of four children with low, average, and high abilities in writing (Russell, 1985) examined the relationship between peer conferencing and revision. The results indicated that in revising, poor writers were dependent on the questions of other students, whereas average and good writers tended to become their own audience and revise on their own.

Another case study conducted with freshmen (Berkenkotter, 1983, 1984) sought to find out how students interact in their writing groups and whether writers improve their texts as a result of the interactions. The research revealed that the students' attitudes toward assistance from their peers varied considerably, as did the writers' approaches toward revision. One student, Stan, was too immature to heed his audience. Because of her sensitivity to audience, another student, Joann, became vulnerable to unwarranted criticism. Although a third student, Pat, felt responsible to his audience, he felt a greater obligation to his emerging text and revised independently of peer suggestions. The study concluded that students writing for an audience of peers as well as their teacher do not necessarily benefit from their peers' suggestions.

An experimental study (Rijlaarsdam, 1987) looked at peer feedback among 11 classes of eighth-grade students in eight Dutch schools. The control group received teacher feedback; the experimental group received peer feedback. Although the study had hypothesized that there would be more frequent evaluation and revision in the

experimental group, the results showed no differences between the two.

PEER REACTION SEEMS TO WORK IN COMPUTER-ASSISTED INSTRUCTION

Preliminary evidence suggests that the nature of peer collaboration and feedback in classrooms where computers are used to teach writing differs from that in regular writing classrooms. Under certain conditions, computers as writing tools appear to promote a collaborative environment, both in learning to write and in learning to use the technology (Daiute, 1986; Dickinson, 1986; Herrmann, 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Hocking and Visniesky, 1983; Selfe and Wahlstrom, 1985; Sudol, 1985).

In a classroom of first and second grade children, the computer created a whole new social organization that affected the way the children interacted (Dickinson, 1986). An ethnographic study that described a high school classroom (Herrmann 1985b, 1986) found a similar result. A variety of types of peer collaborations developed, having various kinds of influence on writing and revision; but not all students learned to collaborate successfully. The success the students had in revising their work appeared to depend, in part, on their ability to form effective collaborative relationships.

The literature suggests that the effects of peer comments on revision is not a simple cause and effect matter, but rather a complex one, dependent upon the interrelationship of multiple factors within the evolving social environment. While some of the students studied appeared to benefit from the comments of their peers, not all students in all classrooms did. Some students were unable, unwilling, or even ill-advised to follow peer reactions in revising what they had written. While there may be no one-to-one relationship between peer comments and revision, these studies, particularly the qualitative ones, suggest a range of real and potential benefits for students participating in an effective community of responsive peers.

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