SHAPING THE EDITING GROUP

When I joined the first Greater Kansas City Writing Project in June, 1983, I was glad to learn that we would be working in editing groups. I had been part of a fiction editing group for about five years and was used to the routine. I had learned a lot from the comments of the fiction writers and valued the camaraderie.

But I was curious about the Writing Project group. How could we become a group in only a few weeks? I was relieved when the five of us proved congenial, but was uneasy because no one wanted to say anything negative. One day I worked up my nerve and said to one of my group members, “Promise you won’t hit me, but I think you sound patronizing in this paper, and I don’t think you want to.” She didn’t hit me and didn’t take offense. We talked about her paper, and the others chimed in, and after that we weren’t so delicate about the comments we made about each other’s writing.

The next semester I began dividing my classes into editing groups. Some groups were more successful than others, and I tried different ways of encouraging interaction: criteria sheets, check lists, and questions all helped. No student group seemed to work as well as my fiction group or the group of the Writing Project.

I wondered what was needed to make a group work. My experience has been that good groups have two characteristics: the members are motivated and mature. They want to learn how to write better, and they take advantage of the editing group to do this. But not all students are either very mature or highly motivated. Even those of us who teach college composition classes get a mixture delivered by the registration gods and must work with what we get. My problem is to foster an environment where students, even immature or unmotivated, can learn.

My expectations influence how the groups work. I tell the students I expect each editing group to have the goal of responding to each member’s writing. I recognize that each student has his individual goal—his grade. And, of course, any group must have common tasks and common goals.

First, I try to establish a group identity. I divide the class into groups and tell each group to design a crest, choose a name, and compose a motto. I have had A-Teams, Rough-Writers, The Orson Welles Fan Club (“We will turn in no paper before its time”), Knights of the Writing Table, The Twilight Zone and The Re-Writers, among others.

Besides developing a group identity, the members need to know each other as individuals. It’s hard to trust a stranger, and these students will be entrusting their writing to each other, so they need a little confidence that they can communicate. Since group members and the teacher become the audience for the students’ papers, the student-writers need to know whom they’re talking to. Some free-writing activities which encourage students to share personal information of a non-threatening nature are A Snapshot of Myself (written), My First Memory of (teacher, guilt, playmate, fear), My Perfect Day, and one-on-one interviews. The students interview each other, and I interview one student and he interviews me. We all read the results aloud in class.

I try to start with five in a group. We have a thirty percent overall dropout rate, and I never know if I’ll end up with a group of six (some of whom enrolled late), or of three because of drops. If there are only two students left in a group, I put them with the smallest group. A former student once said that with more than five in a group, a leader emerges, and that person isn’t always the best person to comment on writing. He might be the bossiest or the one who talks loudest. With three, you don’t have enough ideas circulating, he said.

Once a group is formed, I keep it on task by requiring students to read aloud in groups to learn to respond critically. One way of eliciting material for group reading is to begin with in-class prewriting exercises. I pass out copies of material and ask students to respond to news stories, poems, or textbook material. The first exercise for which I write research papers is to write ten research topics. Usually this elicits at least a few ideas from each student, if not ten. Then each student is told to choose his favorite from the list and write ten questions about that topic to which he would like to know the answers. These are read aloud, and group members usually add to the lists. The first assignment to be done outside of class is a search of literature, and this list of questions gives the student some place to begin.

Another way to keep students working is to penalize those who fail to bring material as scheduled. Drafts get points which count toward the
Help them get started, provide guidelines for staying on task and be ready to intervene, if necessary. Then step back and let the process work.

3. Do you get lost? Where?
4. What do you need to know more about?
5. Is the writing clear enough so that you can understand each idea? If not, identify.

As the groups work, I float from group to group to answer and ask questions. This way I can tell if they're on task. When they complain that they want my comments, I explain the theory for using groups: feedback from several people on a draft is better than feedback from the teacher on the final version when it's too late to make changes. I tell them people who work in groups learn to write better. I tell them about my own fiction group and share my feelings about receiving feedback. (I showed one class what a draft of this article looked like after Michael Vivion, Director of the Greater Kansas City Writing Project, had gone over it. We groaned together.)

Each group takes on its own identity after a while. Some work well. Some never work smoothly and I spend more time with them. Some work better on ideas and prewriting than on text. Some groups are so bright and fast they want to leave early because they really are finished. Some prefer to read each others' hard copy because the group is large, they can't get all their papers read aloud in time, or because it gets too noisy in the room. Some prefer written comments, some spoken.

Trust the groups. They are probably accomplishing what you want even though they may not be doing it the way you wish. The hardest thing for me to get used to was the feeling I had lost control. I did have to relinquish bossing and lecturing, but I began to learn how to model, to ask questions, and to coach. If you expect the groups to work, this is what to do: Help them get started, provide guidelines for staying on task, and be ready to intervene, if necessary. Then step back and let the process work.

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