Books

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SHARING WRITING: PEER RESPONSE GROUPS IN ENGLISH CLASSES
by Karen Spear
Heinemann Boynton/Cook

Students in our English classes sometimes seem to provide the most compelling evidence against using small groups for discussion and revision work. They lack maturity, they share little interest in writing, they seem unable to read professional and student texts analytically, and they appear to lack the background for working collaboratively with peers. Groups involved in revision work may wander aimlessly through a student essay, engaging in a kind of hit and miss editorial exercise without ever addressing the genuine needs of the text and its writer. At best, as James Moffett says, young writers may be able to identify writing problems, but since they often cannot understand the underlying causes, they have great difficulty in offering solutions for those problems. In addition, we may as English teachers instinctively dismiss group or collaborative work because we were taught in traditional, teacher-centered classrooms and find the experience somewhat alien.

With Sharing Writing, however, Karen Spear provides an extended theoretical discussion of peer response groups and a wealth of practical applications for teachers who are either skeptical about using such groups or seek informed guidance about teaching writing through group interaction. Her particular audience, secondary and higher education writing teachers, will find in Part I (“Challenges of Peer Response Groups”) a realistic and fair-minded analysis of the benefits and difficulties of sharing writing in groups. On the basis of transcripts, interviews and her own observations of secondary and college students, Spear identifies five fundamental problems with collaborative groups. Grounding her discussion in the problems of classroom experience, she asks us to see and understand the “actual dynamics of such groups, discouraging as they sometimes can be,” so we may structure groups for more effective interaction and writing. Chapters include discussions of related topics—connections between the composing process and the interpersonal process, problems in sharing writing, the actual reading of drafts, revision of drafts in groups, and moving from teacher-centered to peer-collaborative roles.

Teachers may find Part II (“Developing Peer Response Groups”) more practical and more helpful than the earlier section because Spear provides so many examples, models, and suggestions, which have immediate classroom application. We see successful groups in operation (through transcripts with Spear’s helpful commentary), we observe a peer-centered class from its inception (the sequence of steps, assignments, and Spear’s many valuable suggestions), and we may sharpen our understanding of how we can strengthen students’ skills fundamental to writing and group work: reading peer texts constructively, listening as a writer and reader, and giving effective feedback.

In what follows, I want to discuss Spear’s book from two vantage points: as it helps writing teachers conceive (or reconceive!) the art of teaching as a collaborative process, and as it aids teachers in restructuring their classes so students will encounter writing as a “lively communal activity” (Spear’s words) where the sharing of experiences, feelings, and ideas becomes itself a rewarding undertaking.

Spear identifies three assumptions about writing and group work, stated in the preface, which help us to see the rewards of collaborative teaching. She suggests that composing is an interpersonal process, that student problems in writing and group interaction parallel one another, and that when students learn at the same time to write and participate in groups, writing and learning become more closely associated with exploration and discovery in a dynamic

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sense. Much of the first chapter links the composing and interpersonal processes in an analytical and descriptive fashion. We see relationships between writer and audience, and the excitement engendered by learning to write and interact in groups.

I found most convincing Spear’s commentary on part of a transcript of a successful group revision session coming at the end of Part I. A student writer, Carol, has begun to realize how she can, with the help of her group, project herself into the audience’s perspective and see her writing as they see it. Spear’s comments crystallize the value of response groups as a teaching strategy:

“Once this awareness sinks in, students become more likely to compose alternative constructions aloud, using the group as a sounding board. Unlike composing sentences in private, oral composition in groups seems to capitalize on the writer’s projected self as she hears her words the way her audience does. Even if peer feedback is minimal or poor, the projected self seems to provide some of its own feedback; one hears not just as oneself but in another, enlarged role” (p. 66).

In other words, peer groups help student writers to be self-conscious, reflective and critical about their writing in the same way that public speakers can often “read” their audience’s responses as they speak, staying on course, modifying, as the situation dictates. Sharing writing allows students, as Spear says, to rehearse ideas and written constructions before putting them into a final form.

Spear’s book also helps us to realize that while collaborative learning offers certain advantages, teachers must first understand the problems they will encounter with response groups. She lists five interrelated problems, promising to treat them as themes throughout the book. They include: confused expectations about the group’s purpose and the individual’s role in it; inability to read group members’ texts analytically; misunderstanding about the process of writing and revision; the failure to work collaboratively with group members; and the failure to monitor and maintain group activity.

Chapter 2 provides a transcript of an unsuccessful revision session along with Spear’s occasional commentary about specific problems we see in the transcript. Many of the problems are strikingly familiar, and made more so by the typical language, colloquialisms, and hesitations of these lower division college students. They show ambivalence about criticizing one another (“feel free to cut me to ribbons”), they cannot ask concrete questions, they cannot focus the group’s concerns, and they tend to wander aimlessly from point to point.

Spear’s commentary and subsequent discussions provide specific strategies for remedying these problems through instruction, modeling, and other suggestions. She focuses on reading peer drafts in Chapter 3 (her discussion places reading in context, but seems sometimes to emphasize the theoretical at the expense of practical application), revision in Chapter 4 (with fine suggestions about helping readers make one-sentence statements of the main idea as they perceive it), and role redefinitions in Chapter 5 (helping students in groups to move from acting as “teacher surrogates” to “peer collaborators”). In addition, Chapter 5 presents two partial transcripts of successful group sessions in which students demonstrate a focused use of peers in brainstorming and reinforcing the notion of audience. Coming after examples of unsuccessful group revision work, Spear’s edited transcripts help us appreciate the possibilities of collaborative teaching.

If Part I lays the groundwork for understanding the dynamics of group interaction, Spear provides in Part II strategies for instituting and maintaining peer response groups in our classes. Her strategies do not provide a systematic program; rather, they present guidelines for those interested in using peer response groups in writing classes: introducing a peer-centered class; activities and lessons for the first several weeks; monitoring groups and dealing with failures in group work; and teaching skills vital to the success of response groups.

Many of the traits of successful revision groups emerge in a long transcript accompanied by Spear’s commentary in Chapter 6, and bear repeating. For example, the
group probes for a clear statement of the writer’s goals; when they discover that statement, they think through the piece with the writer, consistently sticking with the topic; they ground their comments and criticisms in their own readings and reactions, giving the writer repeated opportunities to rethink her text in light of audience response.

Since Spear’s students include upper division English education majors, secondary teachers may rightfully desire an example of successful group work among average high school students. None is present, and many of her suggestions for peer groups are made in the context of university courses. Nevertheless, the traits and subsequent guidelines provide a flexible outline secondary teachers might adapt for their own students. For example, teaching response groups to examine a text for a clear statement seems vital in any writing class, and Spear’s later suggestion that students compose, in groups, a single main idea for a data-based essay has application for all students.

When I read Spear’s descriptions of how she begins her freshmen writing classes (Chapter 6), I found it easy to imagine how her students may begin to experience writing as a lively communal activity. They share their writing during the first session; they get to know one another quickly (she describes a “name chain” activity [p. 153] in a catalog of group activities which serves as the final chapter); they interview a fellow student and write a sketch which is published by the end of the first week as a classroom handout; and they experience group members as important resources in producing their own writing. Interestingly, she avoids evaluation of these early writing sketches, asking students instead to discuss “how” they composed their texts. (Process is emphasized, and students begin early to develop expectations about their classroom as a community where sharing is a vital activity.)

Early assignments—a data-based assignment using Spear’s data only, for example—present low-risk writing during which students work in groups discussing and evaluating information, while in later draft and revision sessions they benefit from worksheets and focused questions (pp. 92-94).

Other suggestions which enliven writing include the way in which Spear as teacher shares her authority by enlisting students’ suggestions and feedback, and her readiness to involve herself in the day-to-day problems of groups. My own experience with groups confirms the importance of her suggestions. When I present activities as experiments, explaining my goals and asking later for evaluation, students slowly begin to think about their own learning and about the processes we employ in our daily work. Spear’s advice about maintaining peer response groups deserves quotation and comment:

“Thus, the teacher’s most effective stance in maintaining collaborative writing classes is to confront group behavior openly, to anticipate the problems students are likely to have, and to recognize them as a natural part of the process. Most of all, teachers shouldn’t be embarrassed or defensive when calling attention to students’ performance, but should couch their criticism in the context of continued encouragement, understanding, and growth” (p. 99).

As I read these words, they reminded me of a J. D. Salinger quote which seems out of date today, at least in classrooms where the excitement of collaborative learning permeates the air. “You don’t have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher,” Salinger wrote, probably imagining the classroom in which teaching often meant lectures, notes, and questions which rarely, if ever, asked for personal reflection. In Spear’s classroom and in many classrooms today, teachers must constantly assess individual and group learning, the problems of interpersonal dynamics, monitoring and shaping the kinds of discourse in which students engage—all tasks which demand engagement with students on a personal as well as an intellectual level. In such surroundings, the promise of genuine engagement with other human beings and of real learning demand active thinking of teachers and of their students.

Part of making writing a lively communal activity involves, of course, the dynamics of interpersonal communication. Spear’s final chapters offer sugges-

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tions for the improvement of reading, listening, and giving feedback as these skills may improve group interaction. Though teachers may be tempted to treat such activities mechanically, as skill building exercises only, many of them can serve to sensitize students to the art of communication—how and what we hear, how we present ourselves and how we are perceived. Chapter 9 ("Listening: The Foundation for Sharing"), for example, lists the research findings on good listening, and provides guided activities in which groups can apply those findings to their own behavior. Spear divides listening skills into four dimensions—attending, reflection, drawing out, and connecting—and offers activities for each dimension. In one exercise designed to improve attending, students are given a controversial topic and asked to summarize the previous speaker's position before explaining their own views. The notes at the end of these chapters (and many other chapters) provide additional resources teachers may wish to use for activities and ideas.

Although Spear concludes her book with a helpful miscellany of suggestions for group work (establishing groups, self-disclosure, movement exercises, modeling, maintaining groups, collaborative problem solving, and recording peer input), she might have provided a more satisfying conclusion by including a student's work in stages along with commentary and brief transcripts. A first draft, revisions, abbreviated transcripts disclosing peer group discussions of drafts or parts of them, commentary, and a final draft—these might have helped us to envision the actual process of sharing writing, and the fruits of that sharing.

Nevertheless, Karen Spear's Sharing Writing provides a well-thought-out framework for understanding the role of peer response groups in the writing class. Her transcripts and commentary bring to life the problems and possibilities of collaborative teaching, capturing the sometimes aimless exchanges of response groups as well as the rewarding moments of student discovery and self-reflection. Her delineation of the problems of group work, so fully documented in her transcripts and commentary, lays the groundwork for instituting many of her later ideas and suggestions in a writing class. And, perhaps most importantly, Spear's book helps us to envision our classes as communities in which it is not what we give, but what we share that enriches each of us, teacher and student alike, and helps us to achieve our fullest potential.

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EMBRACING CONTRARIES
by Peter Elbow
Oxford University Press

Peter Elbow's important new book, Embracing Contraries, consists of twelve essays on cognitive development and pedagogical theory organized under four main headings: "The Learning Process," "The Teaching Process," "The Evaluation Process," and "Contraries and Inquiry." All but the last essay and an extended excerpt from a peer observation journal have been published previously. Omitted is any work directly about writing or the teaching of writing (on the assumption apparently that this is already widely available in Writing Without Teachers and Writing With Power), though much of the theorizing here has obvious implications for composition practice, forming the theoretical basis for Elbow's well-known teaching on freewriting, writing groups, and the notion of power or voice in prose.

What compels me about this collection, first, is the "power" and "voice" of Elbow's own style, his capacity to practice as a writer what he preaches as a writing teacher. Embracing Contraries is a good read in a way that few books about writing ever are. Part of the reason for this is that Elbow is instinctively autobiographical, grounding his observations in who he is as a writer and teacher and dramatizing the processes of his thinking as he works through the implications of his experience. Each essay in the collection is prefaced by a short passage describing the origins of the ideas, the places and scenes and times of the piece in Elbow's teaching career, so that in the end we have a real sense