Behind Their Backs:
Proximity and Insult in Student Response

BY ROGER GREEN

The response group has become a staple of language arts classrooms. However, many teachers have kept a distance from these groups as they meet, believing that to intrude will have the effect of damaging the delicate chemistry that is emerging among the writers. But at the beginning of this school year, I decided to take a step closer to these groups. I wanted to know more about what goes on in the minds of my ninth-grade students as they work together on their writing. I gathered information by observing groups as they worked and by asking the students to write to me about their experiences. I thought I knew what happens in reading/writing groups, but I have been surprised by what I learned. In fact, I did not fully appreciate the intellectual and social challenges reading/writing groups pose.

For the last seven years, my students at the magnet school for science and technology where I teach have been writing and sharing in small groups. In recent years my students have commented on one another's writing in two ways: with the author of the piece present in "reading/writing groups," and in the author's absence in "publication committees." In a reading/writing group, each author reads his or her paper aloud, takes notes on the group's discussion of the paper, and later revises. In the publication committee, since the author of the piece is not a member of the group, a student acts as an agent for the author. This person reads the story aloud, takes notes on the discussion, and then writes a letter to the author explaining the group's thinking, elaborating where appropriate. I had viewed these two types of groups as nearly identical because they followed such similar procedures. In my mind, a publication committee was simply a reading/writing group working on a paper written by a student from another class. I came to see that students work quite differently when the author is not present. To illuminate this difference, I need to explain how my students came to be working in publication committees.

My department has been using publication committees in a variety of formats for eight years. Some years I exchange student papers with those from another teacher. This year I rotated the papers among my own three ninth-grade English classes. The students were primarily writing fiction in a variety of forms. The students took the first drafts of their papers to their reading/writing groups in their own classes, and I gave the second drafts to publication committees in another of my classes.

Before the reading/writing groups met for the first time, I took extensive steps to prepare the students to talk with each other about their writing. All of this preparation also applied to their work in publication committees.

The initial preparation consisted of several steps. First, the whole class commented together on a story written by one of the students in the class. I made extra copies of the story, and the whole class sat in a circle. The author read the piece aloud and then we talked about it. As the students commented, I led a discussion about the comments they made. We noticed that the story had strong points. We noticed that in some places characters or settings weren't described very clearly, and some parts were not logical. I emphasized the need to phrase comments kindly. Then, each student wrote comments about the first draft of a story written several years ago by a student of mine. After everyone had written his or her own comments, we shared ideas about the story and identified the most significant problems with the piece. The whole process of drafting, followed by reading/writing group meetings and further revision, stretched out over twelve weeks. The students went through two revisions again later in the year, this time taking about five weeks since I did not need to repeat the initial preparation.

After the initial work as a whole class, the students met in reading/writing groups to talk about their own stories. I outlined a procedure similar to the one we had used working together. The students would read each paper aloud, discuss it and take notes. Each group had four members and two copies of each student's paper. The groups met for four 45-minute sessions. After each session, I collected the notes the students had made during the discussion, gave the students a grade on their comments, and wrote notes to them about the quality of the comments. I also sat with groups and helped them comment.

The students revised with the help of the reading/writing group's comments. I collected the revised drafts and passed them onto publication committees in a different class. For example, I passed the drafts from my 5th-period class to groups in my 6th-period class. Students could submit their papers anonymously if they wished.
As the students settled down to work in publication committees on the revised drafts, I scanned the classroom for problems. The students sat in tidy circles of four spaced evenly around the room. One student in each group read a draft aloud, and the others followed on copies, just as they had done when they met in reading/writing groups. The students had worked well in reading/writing groups on the first draft of their own papers, so I felt they knew what they were doing.

I was just about to stand back and congratulate myself for preparing the students to talk about writing when I detected an ugly, sneering laugh from a group by the windows. Are they off topic already? I wondered irritably. No, they were obviously involved with the story. A student resumed reading aloud as I casually strolled over. They looked up at me, but kept working. I recognized the story they were reading. It was a sensitive reminiscence of a real-life, tragic experience. Under my stern gaze the group stopped giggling and worked quietly. Across the room a group broke into peals of derisive laughter. “And look at this sentence,” I heard someone whisper, provoking more snickers. I moved in their direction. As soon as I moved away, the first group began to cackle again. Then another group started to howl. “This really sucks,” a student in a third group hissed, his group nodding enthusiastically.

I could barely contain my frustration. I could not understand why my students would insult the work of other students. They had not been cruel when they worked in reading/writing groups on their own stories. Their arrogance truly caught me off guard.

Fortunately, for the most part, I contained my aggravation. I was a researcher, after all, as well as a teacher. I watched in bewilderment over the next few days as groups of ordinarily mild-mannered students in each of my classes ripped through story after story from another class. I listened in on groups of barbarians as long as I could stand it, occasionally resorting to snide comments whispered under my breath. Rather than just canceling the publication committees, I decided to see if I could figure out what was going on.

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Lisa put it even more bluntly in her log: “The publication committee was much more fun. If a paper really stunk, you could say so and not worry about hurting the writer’s feelings.”

Freed by the author’s absence to speak honestly, my students delighted in brainstorming ideas about the story. When they saw something they didn’t like, they said so, and the whole group felt free to agree enthusiastically. The process was exhilarating and creative. Student after student praised the freedom of the publication committee. Hannah put it this way:

Being in a row group and being on a publication committee were two totally different experiences. In one you are dealing with the author and in the other you’re not. When you deal with the author you are careful of the feelings expressed and of how you phrase things. When you aren’t dealing with the author you are down right blatant and say exactly what’s on your mind. It is almost two totally different ways of looking at a story. Not that one is good and the other is bad. They just get you different results.

My students’ comments about publication committees raised questions in my mind about reading/writing groups. Hannah’s comment suggested to me that the reading/writing sessions required a different mode of thought from the publication committees. I realized that before making a comment in a reading/writing group, the student had to decide how the writer would react. The student not only had to figure out what to say about a piece, but had to decide
Behind Their Backs: Proximity and Insult in Student Response

whether the comment would do more harm than good. The reading/writing group required a measured, sensitive and necessarily self-edited response. The publication committee session, on the other hand, invited uninhibited brainstorming of ideas. Students felt free to say whatever came to mind without worrying about how it sounded. This seems to me to be an important observation about the way students look at the writing of their peers. Even in a near-ideal situation in which literate, well-intentioned students truly want to be helpful, they must struggle with how to phrase their comments kindly. Not only that, but they must be aware of their body language so the author does not guess their thoughts. At least this is the way they felt. Nearly every student reported being sensitive to the feelings of the author, if the author was present.

Each student in the publication committee wrote a letter to one author explaining the group’s ideas about the story. I was worried about how the letters would sound, but when they came in, they were courteous and thoughtful. In a few cases, the letter writer was overzealous, but the vast majority of letters were models of decorum. In their final evaluations of the whole process, the authors praised the letters’ seriousness and insight. It was clear that in most cases, the publication committees had been at least as helpful as the reading/writing groups, and in many cases more helpful.

So how did the letters end up being so sensitive if the groups had been busy dissecting the stories? Rachel pointed out that being able to shape the comments into a letter was helpful:

It was hard reading a story and then immediately having to come up with ideas to make it better. But if I got to take a story home and look at it, comments were much easier to make and I think they were more helpful to the authors. … It was great being able to plan out exactly what I was going to say and how I wanted to say it.

Charlie put it a little more cynically:

One thing I learned from being in a publication committee is that people don’t always say what they mean. When my pub. committee and I wrote comments to the authors, we often disguised what we meant to make the letter sound nicer.

So, after the group brainstormed lots of ideas about a piece, the letter writer took notes home and quietly decided how to phrase everything and also decided which comments to omit. With this extra time, few of the students failed to write a letter that was both polite and helpful.

Some students noticed a difference in the kind of comments made in the two groups. Walter noticed that

…in a r/w group, comments tend to be about details, and if a general comment comes up, the comment is usually pretty vague. This is mostly because the comments are spur of the moment type things. The commentor hasn’t had time to think about it yet. On the other hand, in publication committees, the people have a week to think about the story. The comments tend to be more

meaningful and deeper than in the r/w groups.

Walter meant that the letter writer had a week from the time he or she first saw the story until the letter was due.

Even though my students reported advantages to working in publication committees, they also recognized the strengths of reading/writing groups. Perhaps the most important advantage is that the writer can ask and answer questions. In the reading/writing group, work on the paper can be a conversation. As Jack put it,

I think that what really influenced my revision the most was my r/w group’s comments. They seemed to be more helpful because I actually sat down with them and could see exactly what they were talking about. When I got my publication letter, I didn’t know what they were talking about in some places, and they weren’t right there with me so I couldn’t get any comments in really great detail like I could with my r/w group.

The conversational nature of the reading/writing group also lends itself to follow-up questions. Linda noticed that “in a r/w group, the author is sitting right in front of you. You can ask the author questions and listen to their responses. You can also respond to their responses and any questions they have about their story.”

Alan had an experience that could happen in a reading/writing group but not in a publication committee. As his group discussed his story about a trip to Czechoslovakia, he began to tell anecdotes that
were not in his paper. The group encouraged him to include these funny anecdotes.

Even though Louise appreciated the give and take of the reading/writing group she recognized the value of the objectivity of the publication committee:

_I liked my r/w group better because I was able to defend myself and my story, and make 'on the spot' corrections. However, I think my publication committee helped my story more because they saw it from an objective point of view and made judgments based solely on their... impressions and not my presence waiting to clear up an confusion._

Mary made a similar point:

_In the r/w group, I could talk with the author and get answers to my questions. It was easier to explain how you felt and also give the writer information they needed. In the publication committee, it was possible to look at the writing objectively and give advice about overall impressions._

My students worked on the pieces in the reading/writing groups first, and later submitted revised drafts to the publication committees. Thus, the publication committees were working on more polished drafts. It may be that the more distant, formal publication committee lends itself to work on a more polished draft, but I'm not sure this is the case. I suspect that more important factors may be the student's relationship with the reading/writing group and the nature of the individual story.

Later in the year, the students went through the whole process again. This second time, I gave them a choice of whether they wanted their first drafts evaluated by their own reading/writing group or by a publication committee from another class. In spite of the high praise the publication committees had received after the work on the first paper, only 10 students out of 76 requested a publication committee. Thirty-three students requested that a publication committee evaluate their second draft. In conversation, some students said they chose the publication committee to get a more objective opinion; others because they didn't want to have to face their group with a story they didn't like. Still others chose to bring the story to a reading/writing group because they didn't want anyone outside the class to see it. Students continued to be more openly critical in the publication committees than in the reading/writing groups, though the difference was less pronounced. I gave the students the option of changing to a different group for the second paper, and a few students chose to move. During work on the second paper, I observed that the reading/writing groups seemed more comfortable about talking to the writer, and the publication committees seemed less gleeful in criticizing the absent author.

After examining writing groups this year, I'm wondering about the implications of what I have noticed. Hannah may be right that the thinking process is different if the author is present. The thinking process in the reading/writing group is more compressed. Students have to come up with comments and self-evaluate the comments at the same time. In the publication committee the students brainstorm the comments first and later analyze the comments, deciding what to keep and what to leave out.
The students take the issue of confronting an author face-to-face seriously. The students in the reading/writing group were as worried about offending the author as about helping with the story. This sentiment was reported independently by nearly every student. This was true even when the group members simply had questions about the story. Certainly this feeling will diminish with time and positive experiences, but it should not be taken lightly by the teacher introducing students to writing groups.

I have come to understand that giving students the opportunity to talk about writing without the writer present sharpens their commenting skills by simplifying their task. With the writer missing, the commentors can concentrate on the writing without worrying about the complex social skills required to talk directly to a writer.

The reading/writing group requires on-the-spot analysis that lends itself to producing a mixture of helpful and unhelpful comments. Students reported that about half of the comments their reading/writing groups made were useful. They reported that nearly all of the publication committee's comments were helpful. The publication committee had several advantages: time to reflect on the comments, time to evaluate and then eliminate ones that seemed useless, and time to organize the comments logically. I suspect that the publication committees produced many silly, extraneous or trivial comments which were omitted from the letters.

The conversational nature of the reading/writing group was an enormous advantage, especially if the writer did a significant share of the talking. If the writer used the time to ask questions of the group and to answer the group's questions, then full advantage was being taken of this strength of the reading/writing group.

Communication about writing is difficult. In the reading/writing groups, some students worded their comments so diplomatically that the author didn't fully understand the point. As Ali mentioned, the letters from the publication committee were not always clear. Students did report that hearing the same comment from more than one source was very convincing. Sometimes a student had to hear the same comment from the reading/writing group, and then later from the publication committee and from the teacher before it finally sank in.

The students learned as much about writing by reading other students' papers as they did by getting comments on their own work. This was especially true in the publication committees where the students felt free to talk about what really worked and what didn't in a story. I did notice that students were quite capable of deriding a piece for the same faults their own writing exhibited. And, actually, they noticed this fact themselves, which is, I suppose, the point.

In the future, I will continue to use both reading/writing groups and publications committees with student writing. Through my teacher research project, I have come to understand that giving students the opportunity to talk about writing without the writer present sharpens their commenting skills by simplifying their task. With the writer missing, the commentors can concentrate on the writing without worrying about the complex social skills required to talk directly to a writer. However, publication committees can't replace reading/writing groups because authors need the experience of hearing directly from commentors, and more importantly, authors need to talk about their work, responding to questions and suggestions. With practice, commentors can master the skills they need to explain their ideas to an author in person. As I continue to work with student writing, I will be sensitive to my students' hesitancy to speak honestly with authors. I will spend more time modeling commenting skills as the teacher, and I will provide more structured activities where students can practice commenting on writing. Teaching students to talk about their writing is a rich and complex undertaking, and one that is well worth the necessary investment of time and energy.

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