ON-TASK OR OFF-TASK TALK IN PEER RESPONSE GROUPS: REFRAMING THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT BEHAVIOR

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Cynthia: Which one are we doing now?
(pause)

Miles: Um, are you guys going to the Sigma dance this weekend?

Cynthia: Going where?

Miles: The Sigma dance. That our house puts on.

John: I wonder if you girls heard about this one thing our fraternity is having this weekend, um, at the club.

Curt: I don't keep up with this stuff.

When writing teachers overhear peer response groups like the one above, it's hard to believe what some researchers and practitioners say: that response groups are "an ideal means of broadening and emphasizing students' sense of audience throughout the composing process" (DiPardo and Freedman 143). How can the group quoted above be considered an effective peer

response group when they spent another six or seven minutes discussing parties before someone said, "We'd better look at our papers"?

Such off-task talk is one reason why peer response groups often seem like more trouble than they are worth. And yet the potential of peer response to deepen and extend students' sense of audience and collaborative skills makes composition teachers continue to try to find better ways to use peer response groups. Two recent articles in this journal (Jane Schaffer, "Peer Response That Works"; Joseph Janangelo, "Intricate Inscriptions: Negotiating Conflict Between Collaborative Writers") show how problematic we find peer response groups, how we are yet looking for solutions, and how complex the negotiations among teachers and students can become. In this article, I describe one of many "writerly" acts groups are performing when they don't seem to be talking about their papers—exploring audience—and how teachers might (1) explain to students that the indirect talk about text is something to observe, harness, and interpret as "writerly" behavior and (2) make the responsibility for that indirect talk the students'.

Since DiPardo and Freedman's 1988 article, the published material on peer response groups at the college level remains oriented toward problem-solving, placing the burden of reframing and recalibrating the use of these groups on the teachers themselves.[1] As writing instructors, we seem to be continually reinventing the wheel by noting problems such as off-task talk, and devising solutions to them which nearly always require changes in teachers. DiPardo and Freedman's thorough review of research concludes that even though teachers use peer response groups with good intentions,

> 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 decision making writers and readers. (144)

Even when we have resisted a workbook approach to peer response, our tendency as teachers has been to develop innovative teacher-directed strategies rather than student-directed activities. We refine our own orchestrations of activities and directions to students, hoping that an effective peer response group will result.

I agree with DiPardo and Freedman that teachers need to "reframe" their practices in order to enable the work of peer response groups to reach its potential. However, I believe the necessary empowerment of members in peer response groups will come only when teachers redefine the issues of responsibility and control in their classrooms. Instead of seeing the reframing as a loss of teacher control in favor of student control, teachers can see the reframing as a repositioning of responsibility for some peer response group behavior, namely, giving it to the students.

Most off-task talk in peer response groups, which I redefine here as "indirect" talk, is strategic, contingent behavior in response to highly individual situations for which even detailed instructions could not possibly prepare students. No amount of careful, well-theorized instruction can substitute for reflective peer group experience. Teachers know how to use their own reflective experience with peer groups in order to understand better classroom issues; now it's time to guide students toward that same reflective experience.

Exploring Audience: A Closer Look at Indirect Talk in Peer Response Groups

Many of the covert or indirect ways of talking about papers by Cynthia's group, mentioned above, are actually direct ways to find

out about their audiences: How far can I go? What can I say that won't wash with these readers? What do they value? What will they laugh at? The group was in a process-oriented, workshop-based, first-year writing course, faced with the task of writing personally valuable texts and sharing drafts with peers in order to give and receive feedback for revision. Although this group found itself in a fairly typical scenario in classrooms across the country, the situation presents students with a highly tangled web of purposes, values, beliefs, and risks—a web that many professionals avoid at all costs and with which most of our students have little experience before college.

Over the course of the semester, Cynthia's group consistently found that they preferred to talk about the ideas and experiences in their texts and, only with much conflict, responded to specific places in their papers. And yet their exchanges, indirect as they seemed all semester, did somehow change their perspective on their papers, giving them ideas for revision and prompting them to report to their teacher that their group was "fine." The teacher, therefore, did not join this particular group very often nor, as he related later, did he give his students direct instructions about responding to each others' texts. He did tape their response sessions throughout the semester, which I studied later via transcripts.[2] From my observation of many peer response groups who engage in substantial indirect talk, Cynthia's group was not unusual.

The leaders of this group had difficulty separating themselves from their texts. Their usual authorial distance from their school writing was not possible because of the direct-experience based writing assignment; then the peer response group jolted them into a connected, physical relationship with their texts. They weren't handing in papers and leaving; they were handing their papers to peers and waiting for a response. Even the talk which was completely off the texts, such as the discussion of the fraternity

dance, was a way of finding out who their group members were: were they friends with common interests, competitors for the teacher's good will and thus good grades, or acquaintances equally interested in improving their writing abilities? Depending upon what their relationship was, how much of their texts could they share that day, and how much of the teacher's agenda could they follow?

Cynthia's group found at least three ways of discovering their audience, and one way to manage that audience:

1. Sharing stories and common experiences allowed the group to feel out their similarities and differences. Self-revelation was a requirement before the group accepted a member's textual comments. Below, the group discusses John's paper about his grandfather and everyone joins in with comments about their own fathers and grandfathers:

Curt: My grandpa would never have let me drink beer.

John: He really gets going, though . . . he works everyday.

Miles: How old is he?

John: Seventy-five. . . . He gets up at 5:30 in the morning.

Miles: Yeah, but they go to bed at like nine.

Rachel: My grandfather would get up really early, like 5:30 or 6:00, and he'd be in bed by 8:00 every night.

Curt: My dad has to get up every day at four. Work all day.

Not all small groups have a strict, unarticulated rule about sharing, but many do. In Cynthia's group, sharing stories often turned into sharing secrets. Curt admits that he handed in one of his drafts to both of his English classes, John admits he cheated his way through

high school chemistry, and all the members regale each other with stories of their first alcoholic drink.

2. Positing strong opinions or posing oneself as a type forced the members in Cynthia's group to react, making a non-response very difficult. Several members constantly pushed the envelope in order to test the group's limits. Here the group talks about Curt's draft and the possibility of another war.

John: I would put on the armor, I would put on the armored gear and go.

Curt: I'm in the navy reserves, I don't want a war.

John: Aw, kill me man!

Curt: Yeah, I don't want to die.

John had a habit of talking ironically or sarcastically and usually meant the opposite of what he said. Later, after discussing what they would actually be doing if they were in a war, and what they would and wouldn't do, they have the following exchange:

Rachel: I want to be a doctor.

John: You notice, you notice how men would like to kill people and women like to save people.

Cynthia: Why do you want to kill somebody?

Curt: I don't want to either.

Rachel: Yeah, you need somebody who's going to save you.

Curt: I'm going to Canada, somewhere, I don't know.

Miles: Have you ever heard of Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant"? Man, you've got to listen to "Alice's Restaurant."

The group seems to be trying out different attitudes. Curt says he's in the reserves, but he doesn't want to fight, doesn't want to kill anyone, and would go to Canada if there were a war; the others find this an acceptable response but disagree about how they would individually make such a decision. No one questions Rachel's assertion that women are going to end up saving the men from their wars. The group successfully finds that they all agree that there are vast differences between women and men, a subject that forms the basis of several subsequent discussions, and that allows them to disagree about their papers—they write differently because they have different value systems.

3. Guessing each other's motives or projecting suppositions onto each other is a third way Cynthia's group explored audiences. In the guise of teasing, members of the group announce their assumptions about others while acting on them—a surprisingly effective way to explore one's audience by allowing the audience to examine the accuracy or validity of a member's assumptions. Below, Miles tells Rachel that since she is an English major, she should be able to tell him what is wrong with his paper.

> Miles: So what did you guys think of the paper?
>
> Rachel: I loved it.
>
> Miles: Honestly, what did you think? You're an English major, just destroy it.

On another day when Curt is absent, they discuss Curt's motivations for skipping class.

> Rachel: It's 'cause Curt's not here.
>
> Miles: Curt, he always, he doesn't seem like he wants to be in this class.
>
> Cynthia: I don't think he does.

Cynthia: I don't think he does.

Rachel: I don't think so either. I don't really want to be in this class either, but since it's required . . . .

The member whose role is being assumed or discussed then has the opportunity (or pressure, for the less confident student) to agree or disagree with the role placed upon himself. Other members of the group can also jump in, as Rachel did, to support or attack the role for themselves or for other members.

4. Negotiating conflict in the various audiences represented in a peer response group is a fourth use for indirect talk in Cynthia's group. Much of the group's indirect talk was a lengthy way of managing five members' very different ideas about writing and responding. Cynthia's group was pretty good at this kind of negotiation, that is, talking about their problems with response. However, they had real difficulty getting past discussion of their problems and finding consensus on this matter. They generally defaulted to more indirect talk about texts, talk about the course and their teacher's expectations:

Curt: In general, just writing about writing because I can't write about writing. I mean I just have a hard time writing, you know that thing about Murray [the course textbook], I just had a tough time . . . .

Miles: Well, what I usually do is, . . . you know I've never been about to be in a situation like he talks about—hell, you can write about, just write about your feelings, you know. So I just put my feelings down . . . .

Curt: [pretending to write] I'm just a confused student not knowing what I want to do in life because I can't pick a topic to write on. My whole life is lost because I don't know what to write about?

Later in the semester they were still struggling with how to respond differently to different writers. After trying fruitlessly to respond to a fantasy paper by Curt, they discuss why they don't have anything to say and what they think is appropriate:

> John: It's hard for me to criticize anybody with this, it's hard for me to correct, or, with you guys, you know . . .
>
> Curt: You mean, you're always making mistakes in your own writing, and that doesn't make you want to tell someone else that they're wrong making the same mistakes.
>
> John: Yeah. Not unless they're spelling errors or run-on sentences . . . As far as saying, "Well, you need to elaborate a little bit more in this paragraph, or take out a little bit more of this and put in a little bit more of that." This Rachel? Every time she reads my paper, I have to laugh, too. "Maybe you should elaborate more, maybe a little more elaboration." I know I need to elaborate a little more, I don't know why I don't do it. Maybe I just don't feel like sitting at the computer for two hours typing up . . . My teachers told me the same thing in high school.

In their indirect talk, then, Cynthia's group latches onto some of the most important problems that peer response groups encounter, problems most teachers would want them to consider as they responded to each other papers: the difference between response and critique, the problem of correctness versus readability, the writer's need for supportive yet substantive comments, and the complex relationship between writer-roles and student-roles.

Reframing Off-Task Behavior as Indirect Talk: Changes for Teachers

If we want our students to understand the nature of indirect talk in their groups and use that talk to revise their writing, then they need to see peer response group work as a different task than other classroom assignments. The single task "to respond helpfully to peers' texts" must include "to respond helpfully to each other as people" with texts in their hands. Students also must see the role of instructor change from the single role of passing out techniques and strategies for critiquing texts to a multiple one of helping students resolve or tolerate their conflicting roles while improving their writing.

Instead of the instruction-giver before the groups form and then instruction-enforcer while the groups are meeting, the teacher becomes a trouble-shooter or interpreter for the group. As a trouble-shooter, she knows that when a group isn't talking directly about their papers, they may be working through audience expectations or conflict negotiation, not necessarily avoiding the assignment or ignoring her instructions. Four changes in my teaching have emerged from my own experiences observing and interpreting the indirect talk in peer response groups:

1. I give more specific instructions and information about the nature of indirect talk in group dynamics straight to students. I explain the nature of indirect talk and the difference between effective and ineffective indirect talk. Ineffective talk is talk that doesn't help all the students in the group learn something about their papers or their audiences or that makes group members more uncomfortable with each other: it excludes some group members (such as private discussions in the middle of a group discussion); it may be direct talk but it doesn't explain why and how ("It's great. Don't change a thing"); it may be a long discussion of a small point in a paper (for instance, Cynthia's group had a long frustrating

discussion one day about how to spell a word in a draft); it doesn't recognize or support more than one agenda (for instance, when one member of the group monopolizes the talk and allows only one kind of response to papers).

I tell them what I know about effective direct and indirect talk: that student peer response groups need to understand each other as people in order to understand each other as fellow writers, and, therefore, that groups need to discuss their perspectives on the content of their papers and their lives. Sometimes I give this information in the form of a handout; at other times I bring up issues of group dynamics during spare moments in class.

2. I give more specific, but fewer, instructions for the peer response time and have fewer expectations that my students should or can follow them. For example, I may tell them to point out "centers of gravity" (Elbow and Belanoff, 16), to discuss why those places created a center of gravity for them as readers, and to offer suggestions as to how the writer might revise as a result. On the chalkboard, those instructions look like three basic tasks; however, I expect, in their attempts to perform those tasks, the groups will veer off into discussions of why the writer chose the topic, why the writer had specific centers of gravity in mind, what is a center of gravity, can a paper have several centers, is it "bad writing" to have several centers or no centers, how does a writer choose which one to revise toward, does the writer want to change his topic, what does the group really like about the paper, what does the group think about the paper assignment, and so on. I also know that the group will discuss who did not bring a draft to class and why, who will start the discussion, what the response assignment is, what the next week's assignments are, and so on.

In other words, I try to relax in the knowledge that most of that indirect talk is usable, is part of the writing process in a workshop-oriented classroom, and is not automatically a sign of rebellion or

deafness in my students. In fact, the more agitated I am about indirect talking, the more anxious my students become to do exactly what I want. When the peer response group becomes only about what they think I want as a teacher, the discussion they have, as they try to read through my agenda, is as counter-productive as other kinds of ineffective talk.

3. I interpret the indirect talk for groups. Rather than moving to a small group and telling them to get back to their texts, I ask them what they are talking about, become part of the conversation and ask them to backtrack to how they got on that subject, especially asking them if they can speculate as to why they moved onto that tangent. As the semester progresses, they take on the job themselves of retracing their talk to their papers and discussing why they got off track. Some of the reasons students and I have discovered for their indirect talk are as follows: (a) because they're uncomfortable with the instructions for responding and need another explanation and more examples directly relevant to their own papers, and therefore need more specific information from me; (b) because they disagree about what the task of the peer response group is and end up discussing the class instead of their papers, and therefore need help negotiating the best way to respond to their papers; (c) because they have more interesting conversations about the subject matters of their papers than about the papers themselves, and therefore need prompting to revise with that knowledge; (d) because they don't yet trust each other with their papers and often have no experience sharing their papers, so they default to "talking around" their papers. Of course, some groups engage in lots of indirect talk because they are not prepared and need to be prompted to discuss why they don't have texts ready and how to manage their time in a peer response session with no texts.

4. I give the students specific tasks which speed up the process that Cynthia's group went through, which help them to articulate their roles as writers and friends (the two roles which seem to cause the most conflict), and to reveal the kind of audiences that they are for other members' texts. These take the form of short self-reports on what happened in small groups (How did your peer group's talk help you plan your next revision?) and large group discussion of questions and possible answers to ask each other in small groups (What's working well in your response groups? What does your group need to work harder at?). Asking students about their peer response groups during individual conferences also helps students connect their writing to their audience-discovering discussions in their groups (Have your group members found plenty of things to say about your papers? Are there questions you could ask them to help them understand what you need to know?).

Will some groups insist on using the peer response time for no "writerly" talk or for ineffective indirect talk? Is some off-task talk truly off-task talk, when students are procrastinating or unprepared for class? Of course, and they need the strong arm of the teacher-as-enforcer and a specific consequence for their lack of engagement. Placing on students the responsibility for using indirect talk about papers to revise and rethink papers doesn't mean all of our students will take up the responsibility.

Do some contexts leave no time or space for indirect talk about papers? Many teachers have a crush of competing goals to deal with, some imposed from the outside such as exit exams and portfolio preparation. Even allowing students two or three minutes to settle into their groups helps them connect with their audience before reading their papers to each other. Some groups, given the option, prefer to discuss fewer papers but at greater length, rather than rigorously to move on to the next paper at the designated time. My initial response, when it happened, was "Good grief, you've wasted your peer response time." Now I

believe a better response is "Okay, but did the members whose papers weren't discussed get some ideas from the papers that were discussed?" which implies not only that it's possible to glean ideas from the discussion of other papers, but that the discussion of each paper should ultimately connect to every paper brought to the group. Forming smaller groups, even of three students, might be better in some contexts than not allowing students time for indirect talk about their papers.

Reframing Off-Task Behavior as Indirect Talk: Changes for Students

When a writing teacher sees and hears indirect talk in peer response groups as a part of the work of a group of writers, her role in the classroom changes. However, the students' roles have to change, too. They become observers, recorders, and interpreters of their behavior as group members. Ideally, many students will readily take up those roles and tasks, but in reality these changes have to be prompted by teachers, making proof of actual permanent, internal change in students impossible. Nonetheless, requiring students to try on the role of a group member who is as accountable to the other group members as to her teacher is a minimal step in the right direction.

If I pushed my thesis to its limit, I would be writing this article to students. But students don't read academic journals, and few sources for information about peer response groups are directed at students, although more and more textbooks are including sections on peer response techniques.[3] The best source, however, is the students themselves as researchers of group dynamics, in this case the dynamics of indirect talk and writers' needs. Each peer response group session should be supported by students' reflections on those sessions. These reflections can take the form of journals devoted to commentary on group dynamics, individual journal entries about their groups, class discussions, portfolio

memos, mid-semester and end-of-semester reports, brief free-writes to share with each other, and extensive assessments of themselves as group members and of their group as a working unit. The goals for these reflections are:

1. Observation and recording of raw information about who says what and in what order.

How much time do we spend in totally unrelated talk? How much time do we spend talking about things prompted by our papers but not talking directly about our papers? When do we drift away from our papers? Who tends to bring us back to our papers?

2. Analysis and interpretation of those observations.

Why do we spend so much time in indirect talk? What are we avoiding or trying to create when we talk around our papers instead of about them?

3. Connecting school-related group dynamics with naturally-forming groups.

How is the indirect talk in my peer response group like and unlike my group of friends discussing our papers in the library? How do we or could we take the skills that keep our group of friends together and use them in our peer response group?

4. Question-posing about group dynamics, especially in writing groups.

Do groups need indirect talk? Do groups need totally off-task talk? Why? Does our group feel uncomfortable or confused when we are talking indirectly about our papers?

5. Sharing ideas, information, and questions with each other as fellow group trouble-shooters.

Why do some of our group members have completely different interpretations of our peer response group talk? Why does our group engage in a lot of indirect talk about our writing, but the group in the corner never does?

6. Applying the ideas to change, rework, and make one's group more effective.

Are we disappointed that we don't do more direct talk about our writing? Would we feel more confident of our writing if we did less indirect talking? Could we assign one member to remind us when we need to get back to direct talk?

Students are remarkably tuned into each other as group members. Their past experiences in both formal, school-sponsored groups and informal, unsponsored groups give them vast, but largely unarticulated knowledge about group dynamics. Some students need very little prompting to translate their experiences into reflective, thoughtful discussion. They are also capable of understanding dynamics which the teacher can't because she must share her time with many groups at once. One student wrote this about her group:

> As a whole my small group got along well and I think one of the main reasons is because we were concerned about each other. We immediately realized that we were different people from various backgrounds at school for a variety of reasons. Therefore, we had to include all of our opinions and comments when deciding our plan for a particular day.

This student's analysis of her group focused on the members' "we're all in the same boat" attitude; because they all recognized their differences and yet agreed on their goals, both social and academic, they could agree as a group to work on their papers.

Everyone had an equal voice in the group but not everyone had to agree on every concept; therefore, they could negotiate an equally attentive response to each member's paper. Their social goals led directly to their writing goals and, therefore, to a comfortable group which allowed for honest and open responses to their writing.

A different response group, one with more problems, was analyzed this way by one member:

> Why did we get along in our group? I think that the reason was that nobody in the group tried to make themselves feel superior to anyone else. Nobody declared that they were a better writer. Everyone tried to listen and help everyone else. The only problem child we had was Greg. I don't know why he didn't come to class but I don't feel that it was because we shut him out. I personally feel that he felt so uncomfortable with his writing that he couldn't share it with us. When he did come and read what he had written, I feel that the casual response that we gave him and the casual attitude that the rest of the members of the group had developed put him off.

This group valued the equal status of all members as writers. They focused more on their roles as writers, all of whom found writing a challenge, in order to respond to each other effectively. It acted as their "baseline" attitude which gave them the freedom to give each other revision suggestions. The student also gives, in extremely condensed form, a narrative of the group's dealing with Greg during the entire semester. Because Greg didn't attend regularly, he missed the discussions, probably a lot of indirect talk, which helped the group become friendly and relaxed ("casual") with each other and their papers. The student who wrote the response knew that Greg was not comfortable sharing his papers

and that his discomfort only grew as the group moved ahead in their relationships without him.

Both of these groups assessed themselves as effective and helpful in revising their papers. They not only provided feedback and insight into their teachers, but they articulated important "writerly" issues. In the examples above, for one student, comfort in sharing is realized as very important; for another student, caring about each other means caring enough to focus on what they need as "revisers." They wouldn't have approached those issues without the prompting of the reflective descriptions they wrote, even though their descriptions are far from sophisticated articulations of group dynamics. In other words, a group which engages with each other enough to engage in indirect talk is a group which is willing to explore each other as audiences and to write and revise toward those audiences.

An unreflective response group results in the familiar "I hate my response group. All they do is say 'It's fine—don't change anything.'" When a group has nothing to say to each other, when they seem unable to engage in indirect talk about their papers, they can end up not responding at all. Overall, a student's conception of peer response must change to include being a reflective and conscious group member, especially when that means understanding how to describe, identify, and use all the indirect talk a group engages in.

Rethinking the On-Task/Off-Task Metaphor

One of the ways teachers and students can understand peer response groups is by rethinking the assumptions behind labels for groups' behavior as conforming or nonconforming, assumptions which make certain kinds of talk "on-task" and other kinds of talk "off-task." The metaphorical dimension of on-task and off-task terminology for peer groups suggests a water faucet which one can turn on and off at will and completely. If we talk about peer

response groups in such an on-off way, we assume that relationships among peers in a writing class can be turned off and on with the same force of effort as turning a faucet. Taking the cue from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, "on" is generally "good" and "off" is generally "bad." When something is "off," it's spoiled, odd, inappropriate (off-color), out of order (off-track), or disagreeable (off-putting).

Another metaphor behind on-task and off-task labeling is on-stage and off-stage: when the actors are on stage, they are in their "assigned" roles; when they are off stage, they are in their "own" roles. If we talk about peer response groups as actors on stage, we are closer to what our students are actually doing. As Robert Brooke writes,

> college students in writing workshops are developing a world of literacy by exploring the ways people around them use written language, particularly by developing ideas about the purposes for writing from observing others. . . . Through this exploration, they are able to negotiate ways to identify or incorporate a writer's role into their self-understanding. (148)

The difference between actors on a stage and students in peer response groups is that students will always try to combine their assigned student roles with their own developing sense of self and with the range of "writerly" roles available in the classroom.

The problem with both metaphors is that they are both teacher-talk, when they need to become student-talk. The problem isn't the label so much, since there is talk in peer response groups that is clearly ineffective, whether "on" or "off," as is the ownership and agency of the faucet or the stage. By changing the metaphoric on-task/off-task to direct/indirect talk and by expecting both teachers and students to learn to identify and analyze BOTH direct and

indirect talk in order to explore and improve their writing, teachers and students both reframe the purpose of the peer response group to be more flexible and "writerly."

NOTES

[1] Some additional recent attention to small groups can be found in the October 1992 volume of *College Composition and Communication*, which gathered four articles on collaboration and peer response groups. See also my contributions in *Small Groups in Writing Workshops: Invitations to a Writer's Life* (1994). Chris Anson's *Writing and Response* (1989) and Karen Spear's *Sharing Writing* (1988) are helpful resources.

[2] Transcripts from Cynthia's group are slightly edited for readability. All of the students quoted here graciously gave their permission to print these excerpts.

[3] See Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's *Sharing and Responding* and Hephzibah Roskelly's "The Cupped Hand and the Open Palm" as good examples. Virginia O'Keefe in *Speaking to Think/Thinking to Speak* includes analytic and assessment activities for groups in classrooms.

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