IMPROVING PEER RESPONSE: COLLABORATION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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A traditional approach to improving peer response has been to provide students with a list of questions or procedures to guide the feedback exchanged. The rationale for assigning guidelines is that student writers have difficulty reading texts critically and giving constructive, text-specific feedback and that they, therefore, need preparation and direct instruction in how to respond to writing.

An alternative approach — the one proposed in this paper — is based on the assumption that while students do have a lot to learn about giving and receiving effective feedback — as we all do — they have had previous experience as writers, talkers, and collaborators which can serve as the point of departure for learning to respond to their peers' writing. This approach allows for the peers to gradually develop a language of response as they experience the pitfalls of responding in groups. The teacher's role is to monitor the interactions taking place in the groups and to intervene in two ways: through on-going modeling of effective feedback and through guiding discussions about what is taking place in the groups and what changes might be desirable in the kinds of feedback being exchanged. The teacher who uses this approach is a researcher who provides a context for learning and then steps back to observe what is going on. Along with observing, she participates

as an experienced consultant helping the students become aware of their learning processes.

James Britton calls this type of teaching "a quiet form of research": "This requires that every lesson should be for the teacher an inquiry, some further discovery, a quiet form of research, and that time to reflect, draw inferences, and plan further inquiry is also essential" (90). Britton is suggesting that teachers become students of learning and that their teaching reflect an attitude of discovery and revision, based on their observations. What distinguishes the research approach to teaching writing from those in which pre-formulated techniques for response are assigned is that in the research approach, the students can use their own language rather than the teacher's code in talking about writing. Rather than assuming that her students will be unable to carry out certain tasks and will therefore need specific guidelines, the teacher has a chance to discover their particular problems as they try out the peer group activities. In other words, where guidelines for response present students with solutions to problems they may not have, teacher researchers allow for problems to emerge and then, with the students, figure out solutions to those problems.

The first step in taking on the role of writing teacher/researcher is to come to terms with the learning goals of a collaboratively-run writing workshop. This may seem an obvious step; however, it is not uncommon for a pedagogy such as peer group instruction to be adopted without consideration of what it should accomplish. And, of course, when teachers stop assessing the function and goals of the pedagogy they implement, the students are left to act out a series of behaviors which may or may not be beneficial.

Membership in a peer response group entails three interrelated spheres of learning: the first is learning to write, the second is learning to respond to writing, and the third is learning to collaborate. The learning in each of these areas can be viewed developmentally from the hesitant beginning steps when students try out the new activities using what is already familiar to a comfortability with the activities and finally to a realized understanding and mastery of the activities. Part of the teacher's research would be to determine where her students were developmentally in these three areas and how much they should be expected to progress towards mastery in a single semester.

In order to give students a sense of what they should

eventually be aiming for, teachers can devote some class time to modeling. Modeling of good response can be done through whole class feedback to the teacher's drafts as the teacher lets the students know how their responses would or would not be helpful to her in revising, as well as through the teacher's written comments on her students' drafts. One advantage of whole class practice is that students, who have often had little experience with responding to writing, can experiment with different types of response and then get immediate feedback on the effectiveness of their comments. This is quite different from following a set of teacher-formulated guidelines for response which create the illusion that using a special code and procedure will yield the necessary results. Both whole class commenting and the teacher's written comments — if they are not what Nancy Sommers has called "rubber-stamped" comments — reveal the messy, personal yet insightful feedback that a thoughtful reader can provide. The distinction being made here is between models based on collaboration and negotiation between a writer and a reader and models that posit an intermediating formula from which responses are generated.

Along with modeling, the teacher can monitor the actual feedback that the peers are exchanging in their groups in order to discover what is going on and if any changes are taking place from one meeting to the next. One relatively unobtrusive way of monitoring peer feedback is to listen to tapes of peer group meetings which the students have recorded themselves. Transcribing selected tapes, while time-consuming, is an excellent way for teachers to study peer group conversations in depth. I have found that when I take the time to transcribe and analyze the peer group talk of my students and then share my observations with them, they realize that talk is an important part of the composing process. I have also found that students become more aware of themselves as producers of language when they see their utterances in print.

The tapes and transcripts of talk provide the teacher with data for analyzing peer response. She can gauge the peers' learning by comparing what is going on in the talk to the models of good feedback that she has been presenting in her written comments and that have been generated in whole class sessions. She can determine if the responses reflect a concern with meaning rather than with form, if they are descriptive rather than prescriptive, and if they are text-specific. She can also try to discover if, in their conversations about

their drafts, the peers are addressing issues related to the writing process such as invention, revision, purpose, and audience. The difficulty in carrying out this type of analysis is that the students are not likely to speak about writing in terms that are part of the teacher's code. So the job of the teacher/researcher is to listen beyond the words themselves to the types of issues the peers are raising.

Let me give you two examples of peer group talk in which the students are referring to writing process issues while using their own language. I will first give the context, next the peer's comment, and then discuss which issues I think are being raised in the response. There were three freshman writers in the peer group. In the first example, Mark, one of the group members, had just read his first draft in which he explains the distribution of political power in America. His assignment had been to pick a concept from one of his social science courses and to explain it to someone who would be unfamiliar with his topic. After Mark read his draft, Ann made the following comment: "O.K. then, what do mean by 'elite'? I know what you mean, but do *you*" [addressing the third group member] "know what he meant by 'elite'?" Ann pointed out a term in the text which she felt needed clarification — not for herself who had a shared experience with the writer — but for a reader whose experience might be different. She tested out her hunch by asking for another reader's response. This is a fairly sophisticated observation about audience and ambiguity although it doesn't immediately reveal itself as such. Ann's ability to make such an observation is apparent only when something is known about the context in which the remark was made; in this case it is that Ann and Mark were both taking the same politics course and therefore had a similar association to the word "elite."

When reading transcripts it is helpful to keep in mind the types of writing process issues the peers should be addressing and then to allow their language to reveal how, if at all, these issues are surfacing. While Ann never mentions the terms "audience" or "ambiguity," these are aspects of the writing process she is concerned with. Of course, my interpretation is a guess about the responder's intentions. Even if I were to interview her, however, I would not necessarily find out what her intentions were at the time she formulated the response because, as Douglas Barnes has pointed out: "a retrospective account by participants in a conversation of 'what happened' will be different from their on-going account of 'what is hap-

pening' " (18). Yet speculation by both teachers and students of "what happened" during the peers' conversation is very useful as an instructional strategy for improving response. By trying to reconstruct why they said what they said and then proposing how they might have responded differently, students can learn to take more control of their oral comments. When they read and discuss transcripts, the peers see that their language is susceptible to various interpretations and to manipulation, and while there has been no research in this area, it could be hypothesized that this awareness of choice-making in talk would lead to more extensive revision in writing.

It is within this context of students using their own language to reflect upon and revise their talk that teachers might want to introduce terms such as "audience" and "ambiguity" to help students talk to one another about writing more precisely. The terms, having been mapped directly onto the peers' shared experience, may then work their way into their repertoire of responses.

Discussions about transcripts can take various forms and can center on various instructional goals. In giving my second example I would like to propose a way of using particular responses found in the transcripts to instruct students how to elaborate their insights about a text. The second example comes from a conversation that took place earlier in the semester between the same peers as those in example one. The assignment was to develop a metaphor for learning. Mark read his draft in which he introduces, but does not develop, the metaphor of student as a mouse in a maze to describe his first semester at a large urban university. After hearing and reading the draft, Ann made the following comment:

> Alright. Um. . . you're saying in the first paragraph — your metaphor about the tiny insignificant mouse — it seems to me like you don't carry it through. It seems then you get into as if the class were a joke and it seems like you have two there almost. You bring it up a couple of times, but I don't know if it really tied in. It seemed like you just put it in to. . . Maybe you should tie it in more with the maze thing of how you thought you were in a maze into more of the other part that the teacher . . . maybe when the teacher was just reciting or being incoherent or whatever, it was like bumping into the wall of the maze or something like that.

The first part of this response deals with logical entailment while the second part is a premature suggestion for revision. Ann begins by telling Mark that the two purposes of his draft don't seem to tie in. She says that he began with a metaphor about a mouse and then dropped that metaphor and started to describe a class. Ann uses such expressions as "it seems like you don't carry it through" and "it seems like you have two there almost. You bring it up a couple of times, but I don't know if it really tied in." In order to make Mark understand her confusion in reading his draft, she would have to cite places in the text where she got lost. She would have to give text-specific evidence of the lack of logical entailment so that he could become aware of the abruptness of his shift from the mouse to the description of the class. Instead of portraying her confusion more explicitly, Ann goes on to give suggestions for correcting a problem that Mark may not yet perceive. She suggests that he tie the two parts of his text together by extending the mouse in a maze metaphor. She proposes that Mark use the device of having the mouse bump into the wall of the maze in order to demonstrate the student's frustration with the class.

Ann's feedback is a good candidate for discussion of how responses can be elaborated to give the writer a better sense of the effect of his words on his reader. Teachers can use partially-successful feedback such as this to explore with the participants why they chose to say what they said, how the writer reacted to what they said, and how they could have expanded the descriptive, text-specific portion of their feedback into a more complete reader response. Ann reveals an ability to read critically and to identify the center of her confusion, but she has yet to learn to give a thorough account of what happened to her as she read. Teacher intervention is necessary in order to point out the difference between descriptive and prescriptive response and to guide the responder in extending and elaborating the descriptive portion of her feedback. Since I did have the opportunity to discuss the transcripts with Ann, Mark, and Pascale, the third member of the group, I know that they assumed their job was to help one another which, to them, translated into giving tips to improve the texts. These tips, however, do not provide the writer with an account of what his text is communicating to his readers and this, after all, is the function of feedback — both from peers and teachers.

There is no simple way of circumventing this problem. It takes time for student writers to become careful readers and articulate responders, particularly when they are operating from a former model of vague, prescriptive feedback. It is only when they begin to integrate the writing workshop teacher's modeling and when they begin to study their own responses and discuss ways of modifying them that their feedback becomes more descriptive.

Combining modeling, monitoring, and intervention to improve response provides a solution to what I have found to be the greatest problem in peer feedback: a lack of true exchange. The transcripts I have studied can be characterized as a series of disconnected responses to the text. The peers formulate individual responses which are often left suspended as another topic or issue is introduced. The talk is focused on a variety of aspects of the text rather than on the emerging conversation about the text, so there is little continuity from one utterance to the next. This may be because students don't perceive in-school conversation as they do out-of-school conversation, and so they engage themselves differently. The idea that peer response group conversation is wholly unlike normal conversation is reinforced when guidelines are distributed. The impression given is that responding in groups is a school activity governed by teacher-generated rules. This is not to suggest that good peer group talk about writing occurs naturally, but it is to suggest that the more preliminary rules teachers impose, the less connected peer group talk will be to the students' world of meaningful conversation.

By allowing students to enter imperfectly into peer group conversations with their own language and conversational habits and then monitoring their feedback while modeling the type that is most conducive to promoting true exchange, teachers can facilitate successful and satisfying ways of talking about writing.

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