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Writing Workshop by appointment Winter 2000

Monday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Tuesday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Wednesday
9 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
and 2:30-5 p.m.
Thursday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Friday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Evening Hours

Alice Lloyd Library
Mondays 8-11 p.m.
Mary Markley Library
Tuesdays 8-11 p.m.

Peer Tutors

Sunday-Thursday
7 p.m. - 11 p.m.
444C Mason Hall

Online Writing and Learning (OWL)

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Pedagogical Theory and Practice: The Role of Writing in Collaborative Learning

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Since the 1970s collaborative learning has been a popular practice in composition classrooms. Closely allied with the case-study approach and problem-based learning, group work was common before that in the sciences, social sciences, and business. In courses in these disciplines students often worked on term-long projects in teams, dividing the research among themselves and writing up their results collaboratively. The humanities were slower to adopt cooperative learning because the problems scholars worked on were more suited to solitary research, and writing theory emphasized forms such as the five-paragraph essay that students “filled up” with content. The writing process model of composition—based on how writers actually write—has changed that; now students in writing classes regularly work in groups, giving feedback on drafts to their peers and sharing revising strategies.

Professor Anne Gere helped to establish the importance of the social dimension of writing in a 1987 book, *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. She found that collaboration was quite common inside the academy as well as out, though not by that name. Collaboration was also called “the partner method, helping circles, . . . response groups, team writing, writing laboratories, teacherless writing classes, group inquiry technique, the round table, class criticism, editing sessions” (1).

According to proponents of collaborative learning like Kenneth Bruffee and Andrea Lunsford, its prevalence in classrooms is the result of an epistemological shift. Scholars and teachers have gone from viewing knowledge as external, preexisting, and objective to something produced by groups in particular contexts, that is, knowledge communities. In

this world view, what we know in any field is the result of collaboration among groups of people with shared interests and language who pool their ideas about their subject, investigate and theorize about it, and pass on their conclusions to be tested, modified, and used by their heirs. From this social process come the intellectual traditions shared by the members of any discipline or profession, indeed, any craft or trade, and from the conversation of humankind in general comes our knowledge (Bruffee, “Peer Tutoring” 129).

Many faculty members acknowledge the benefits of collaboration in their research, and some have added group projects to their syllabi to reflect the common practice of their discipline or profession. Knowing that student collaboration is a good idea is not the same thing as putting it into practice, however, and some instructors are reluctant to require it in courses. They may have heard students complaining that some members of their group didn’t contribute equally or colleagues reporting that projects didn’t live up to their expectations. Like any teaching method, student collaboration requires careful planning of curriculum and assignments, and students need clear instructions for carrying out a group project and specific information about how it will be evaluated.

The topic of collaboration often comes up in discussions in the Sweetland Writing Seminar, in faculty development workshops, and in training GSIs in the Advanced Writing in the Disciplines Program (AWDP). Instructors want to know how to use collaborative writing to enhance student learning. What is the best way to set up collaborative assignments and put students into groups? How can their work be monitored and evaluated? This special issue of the Sweetland Newsletter takes up these questions, offering a rationale for collaborative learning in all disciplines and assignments designed for group work.

Why Collaborative Writing?

In *Collaborative Learning*, one of the seminal texts of this movement, Bruffee explains that writing is at the heart of this mode of learning, no matter the discipline, for writing is the way scientists, members of the professions, and academics “construct knowledge in the language of their communities.” In his view, students deserve the chance to experience the process of knowledge production in the discipline they are studying. The centrality of writing is reinforced by the fact that the primary way to evaluate student learning in any form of collaboration is to evaluate class members’ “written contributions” to the shared project (54).

As researchers and scholars, we have become used to the concept of knowledge as socially constructed, but we do not always remember to consider the implications of this paradigm shift for the way our students learn and thus for the way we plan our syllabus and organize our classroom. Among the benefits of collaborative learning, proponents say, are the following:

- Collaboration demands active thinking and critical response to readings and lectures.
- Students who have worked in groups on their peers’ drafts learn analytical skills they can then apply to course reading.
- Collaboration encourages reflection and self-critique.
- Because students must explain their ideas to others—and defend and modify them in response—they write with an audience in mind.
- Students are encouraged to see intellectual inquiry as an ongoing conversation among peers, one that is not over when the semester ends or they graduate.
- Collaboration is interactive and social; it promotes cooperation rather than competition and thus builds community.

Making Cooperative Learning Assignments Effective

Make sure that writing assignments are suitable to the goals you have set for the course. For example, some writing courses emphasize real-world writing, which means that students practice the types of writing done by professionals in that discipline. If group writing projects are common in the field, students should do their writing assignments the same way. Each group of students should get some practice cooperating to produce a draft and taking turns revising it, thus earning the right to sign their names as co-authors.

Plan how you will evaluate group work. Some instructors require that students write a certain number of responses to their group members’ drafts throughout the term, assigning points for completion and giving more weight to thorough suggestions for revision. In evaluating what Peter Elbow calls “low-stakes” writing assignments—ungraded, short papers or online postings such as reading logs or responses—the instructor might require a group to

review each week’s reading for the rest of the class and give the same feedback and the same number of points to each member of the group.

Remember that collaboration goes hand-in-hand with student-centered pedagogy. When students, not lecturers, are the focus of the course, their learning takes precedence, and writing is best viewed as a tool of learning rather than an end in itself. Any use of computer technology is subordinated to student learning goals. As Krista Homicz, technology consultant to Sweetland Writing Center, says, your curriculum should determine what technology you use, not the other way around. That goes for writing groups, too. In designing a course in which students will work collaboratively, plan group work to enable conversation, problem solving, and other means of learning, rather than to communicate knowledge already learned. For example, when helping Sweetland instructors design reading response assignments on CourseTools, the University’s newly deployed Web-based course environment, Homicz asked each of them to specify what they wanted students to be able to learn from a reading. How the lecturers answered influenced the task they would specify for their groups.

Setting Up Peer Review Groups That Work

When composition programs adopted process-based models in the 1970s, peer response groups became the most common form of student cooperation. Instructors in First-Year Writing courses in LS&A frequently adopt this model, setting up groups of three or four students who act as first readers of one another’s drafts of work in progress. They let the writer know what works and what doesn’t; the writer then revises with a specific audience’s needs in mind, not merely those of the instructor.

Kenya Mayfield, a Sweetland Junior Fellow in 1998, recommends incorporating peer reviews into the syllabus of upper-level writing courses not only because such sessions help faculty and GSIs manage the time demands of reading drafts but because “as students read one another’s work they develop critical reading skills that help them better evaluate their own work” (16). Students do not instinctively know how to give helpful responses, however; they must be trained to work well in groups.

In a faculty development workshop on student writing groups at the Sweetland Writing Center last fall, lecturer Phoebe Jackson outlined four important strategies for instructors intent on turning students into effective peer reviewers:

1. Emphasize the importance of group work to students’ improvement as writers. Instructors can make students’ performance of peer critique part of their course grade. Jackson tells students that they must become good peer reviewers in order for anyone’s writing to get better, for “the better the peer critique, the better the paper.”

2. Begin training students to critique drafts on the

first day of class and continue it all semester. Jackson models the work of a group throughout the first part of the term, asking for volunteers to read aloud while everyone takes notes, paying particular attention to areas the class has deemed important. She lets students generate questions to ask about the draft, such as, Does the paper have a point? Is the writing understandable? If not, where do we get confused? Instructors who ask students to give written responses often hand out questions to guide them.

3. Share good responses with the whole class to demonstrate characteristics of helpful comments. When modeling peer response with the whole class participating, it's a simple matter to ask students to rephrase comments as questions and suggestions rather than telling the writer what he "should" do. When her students have written responses to a peer, for posting on CourseTools or sending on email, Jackson checks each before the student sends it to the writer, sharing comments that identify specific problems for the writer with the whole class. She publicly praises feedback that is likely to lead to reorganization or more support in the revised draft, thus underscoring the authority of the peer reviewer.

4. Require students to turn in peer reviews with the final draft. Seeing feedback shows what kinds of responses spurred the writer to revise. Some instructors encourage writers to acknowledge in a note classmates whose responses were particularly helpful in solving problems and suggesting revisions.

Modeling Peer Critique

Other terms for peer response are "peer editing" or "workshopping." Jackson describes a common form of peer critique. The student whose paper is being discussed reads it aloud. As they listen, students write a detailed outline. Then the writer reads again, while the students note the organizational pattern and listen for clarity at the sentence level. Jackson directs students to take five minutes to write a comment to the writer, which they take turns reading aloud, with Jackson evaluating its usefulness. To a comment on the draft writer's tendency to generalize, she'll say, "Show him where he's too general." To push students to make substantive comments, she often asks, "Could you take this comment and revise the paper?" If not, "the writer is in trouble." Then the students swap papers in pairs, or read them aloud in groups of three or four, continuing the critique.

Jackson's students repeat the process any time they have what she calls a "mid-process draft." They bring a copy for her, which she reads while they are in pairs or groups. She skims them to locate problems and then drops in on the groups to see what the "editor" has found. She directs the comment if the reviewer has missed important concerns, such as failure to attribute an idea to its source.

To diffuse the pain of hearing their writing critiqued, Barbra Morris, longtime lecturer in Sweetland and the

Residential College, directs students to find passages in their peers' writing that work well. She asks them to "find something good, read it, and tell others why they like it." To Dennis McEnnerney, also a Sweetland lecturer, the most effective peer critiques in his English 125 class came from students who said, "I'm going to point this out, because I do it myself." Besides softening the criticism, it indicates that the student has reflected on her own process.

Jackson says that her students learn more than how to respond to others' papers; they begin to take responsibility for their writing; after locating organizational weakness in a peer's work, they begin to find it in their own. Group work also helps them analyze their reading, for they have learned to locate claims and evaluate supporting evidence, which published writing must have as well.

Group Work in the Disciplines

There are many benefits of requiring students to share writing that is in process in any discipline, says Katherine Gottschalk, frequent consultant to the Sweetland Writing Seminar. Sharing drafts shows students that they're not alone in finding language imprecise; others' rough drafts are just as tentative as their own. The benefits of revision become obvious, for students quickly see how working on a paragraph can clear up confusion. When a problem is pointed out, it becomes not a criticism but a challenge to the writer, who is likely to respond with a determined "I can make you understand." Group work also dramatizes the reader, so that the audience one writes for is no longer imaginary but a factor to be considered.

As teachers who set students to collaborating realize, nearly all students participate in group discussion, even ones who rarely speak up in class, which means that discussions can be productive even in large lecture courses. Gottschalk notes that, because students must care about the subject, instructors have to devise group assignments that engage students and that are too big for one person to do in a short time. Students soon realize the advantages of group inquiry in such activities as brainstorming or investigating a broad problem.

Brian Coppola, Associate Professor of Chemistry, designed an assignment for Honors students in Chemistry 210, a large first-year course, that illustrates three of the factors inherent in well-designed collaborative assignments: getting everyone to participate, dramatizing the audience, and motivating students. Coppola took advantage of the controversial 1999 act by the Kansas State Board of Education that removed references to evolution and the origin of the universe from its state education standards to give Honors students a chance to develop a written response—one that he hoped would be a more appropriate defense of science education than that mounted by the American Chemical Society. For this writing assignment, one of a series that asked students to

examine tenets of ethical reasoning and apply them to a moral dilemma in research ethics, students were asked to take on the role of a student adviser to a fictitious national science organization and to draft a 350-word reply to the Kansas Board's decision. Subsequently, the students reviewed and critiqued one another's writing in small groups, then discussed and revised their statements. Finally, the students met together for a 90-minute group session, which was facilitated by faculty members from English and philosophy.

For ninety minutes the students exchanged a variety of points that one could use in support of and in objection to the decision. Topics included the nature of open discourse; the place of scientific instruction in education; the variety of opportunities for religious study; the nature of theories as testable hypotheses; the roles of trust, faith, and belief in understanding; issues of democratic freedom in educational choice; and open- and closed-mindedness in classrooms. Students shared their own experiences in secular and non-secular education, and how these related to the positions they could or could not defend.

Anne Berggren, lecturer in Sweetland, has a collaborative project that works well in literature courses. Each group of four or five students gets a packet of brief examples of a certain genre of writing. Their task is to read through the examples (passing them around) in order to come up with a list of the features and conventions that seem to apply to that kind of writing. When groups were given personal narratives to examine, for example, they listed "rich content," "specific, rather than general, and thus more open to interpretation," and "the writer becomes more knowledgeable as the story progresses and she ends up involving the reader in her development." When they write their own pieces, she can use their words in making comments, such as, "You need richer content," or "You end up knowing the same things you knew at the beginning—could you show how you become more knowledgeable as the story progresses?"

Group Projects

Some instructors break up a large project into segments and make a group of students responsible for each part. Writing may not be the "end," the final product, but it is invariably the means of finding out whether the project is proceeding on a schedule, what the students are learning, and how the group is progressing.

Ralph Story, lecturer in the Comprehensive Studies Program (CSP), concocted a popular project that he has used in English 225, Argumentative Writing. He asks groups of four students to script and make a 30- or 60-second commercial for an imaginary product. Requiring them to work together promotes the idea of a collective mission as well as a collective evaluation, says Story, for every student in the group receives the same grade. Writing and revising their script and then producing it

"makes them subordinate their individual egos, work toward a common goal, and produce a finished product of high quality." Because the class as a whole evaluates each commercial, students learn that it is possible to translate "subjective, open-ended observations into numerical ratings" and that their assessment of others' work is often as critical as the instructor's.

Judy Daubenmier, a GSI teaching English 125, drew on a controversial text, the Warren Commission report on John F. Kennedy's assassination, in designing a group project. After reading and writing response papers to the summary and conclusions of the report and to Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, the students were divided into groups, with each group assigned certain questions about the assassination to investigate in depth. Each group produced a class presentation which required reaching a consensus, but each student in the group wrote his or her own paper, which did not necessarily have to concur with the group's conclusion, thus illustrating Gere's admonition that "the authority of individual creation can coexist with the authority of consensus" (6). Most of the evaluative weight was on the paper rather than the presentation.

Along with Coppola's capstone assignment—the presentation of students' ethical claims orally, in a seminar moderated by outside facilitators—this project demonstrates the importance of evaluating and critiquing group work by collaborative feedback and consensus. Single-minded or absolute standards, or grading rubrics based on the expectation of right or wrong "answers," will miss the complexity and subtleties of many projects.

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