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Outside-In and Inside-Out: Peer Response Groups in Two Ninth-Grade Classes

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This study examines how students interact during a key instructional activity designed specifically to encourage talk about writing: the peer response group. It takes place in two ninth-grade English classrooms: where groups play different but central pedagogical roles. During a 17-week period, 95 group meetings were observed and audiotaped. Also collected were daily field notes, tape recordings of whole class activities, interviews with teachers and students, and some samples of student writing. Data were analyzed first from the outside-in, to characterize the intended functions of groups and the instructional context surrounding the groups, and then for 37 of the groups, from the inside-out, to characterize response group talk. Data indicate that the frequency of response groups relative to other kinds of groups varied across classrooms, as did the relative amount of response that occurred in the group context. Within groups guided by response sheets, students focused 60% of their talk on the response sheets. For some of this talk, they directly discussed the topics raised on the sheets, but for most of this talk they avoided negative evaluation and helped one another complete the sheets just to get the work done. For the other 40% of their talk, for the most part, they spontaneously and informally discussed the content of their writing. In one class in which writers read their work aloud, students engaged in self-response that occurred as asides during reading. In both classes, students had difficulty discussing matters of form or mechanics. Results suggest that future research on response groups should carefully describe the groups under study, specifying the constellation of activities and interactions that surround them. Future researchers also should look systematically for the conditions that stimulate the most productive kinds of peer talk. Similarly, teachers should observe response groups in their classrooms and carefully evaluate students' interactions in the groups against the overall goals for the groups and what students do well together.

Inside a writing response group in Mary Lee Glass's ninth-grade English class, Alison reveals how difficult she finds portraying her close friend for readers who do not know this friend. Marianne helps Alison overcome her difficulties:

> Alison: [reading from her paper] "The Winter Lodge is a

friendly place with a warm atmosphere, a lot of different people with different interests."

Marianne: Okay, so it's like the Winter Lodge is a good place to do [write about].

Alison: I know, but I can't describe it . . . it's because I know everybody there, so I can't describe them because they're my friends and I can't put it together.

Marianne: Oh, you can.

Alison: It's hard describing friends.

Marianne: Yeah, okay, but you tell who they are. Say Mason, my friend, blah, blah, blah. Cause I didn't know who the hell Mason was.

(08-2)[1]

Marianne and Alison's conversation helps Alison expand her audience and provides Alison with important and timely help with an in-progress piece of writing. Ideally, through talking with their peers, student writers like Alison come to internalize the needs of their audience and grow in their ability to imagine and anticipate those needs as they write.

Contrast Alison and Marianne's conversation with another group conversation in the same class. Rebecca, Nancy, and Meryl discuss how they will answer a question on a dittoed sheet given to them by Ms. Glass. The question asks: "What did you think of the introduction? wow, good, ok, ho-hum. Why?" Earlier in the group Meryl admitted that she had not yet written an introduction to her piece. Referring to the question on the dittoed sheet and addressing herself to Meryl, Rebecca begins the conversation:

Rebecca: How'm I supposed to write how interesting is the first sentence if you don't have one [an introduction to the paper]?

Nancy: I just put "don't have one." (laughs)

Meryl: Don't write that!

Nancy: She's [the teacher] not going to see it is she?

Meryl: Yeah!

Nancy: Okay, I'll put "wow"! (laughs)

(10-5)

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[1] The numerical code for the session tells when during the period of observation it occurred. The first number stands for the week and the second for the day. 08-2 indicates that the session meets during the eighth week of observation on Tuesday or the second day of the week. These codes always appear in boldface.

Meryl is not concerned with getting Rebecca's or Nancy's help with her writing. Rather Meryl is concerned with protecting herself from negative comments, especially those that Nancy might put in writing and that her teacher might see.

We know as little about what stimulates Alison and Marianne's productive conversation as we do about what leads to Rebecca, Nancy, and Meryl's less productive one. Nor do we know how frequently either type of conversation occurs in the ebb and flow of response group talk. This study looks at response groups in some detail in two ninth-grade classrooms, selected because both teachers made extensive use of groups but in contrasting ways. Across 17 weeks of observation, large amounts of peer group and surrounding classroom data were generated, with 95 response groups observed in the two classrooms.

This study asks the following questions about the classrooms in the study:

1. *From the outside in*: How do response groups fit into each teacher's overall plan for teaching writing?

   How frequently do response groups occur compared to other kinds of groups? How frequently do students receive response in response groups compared to response in other settings? How does each teacher organize and direct response groups?

2. *From the inside out*: Inside groups in these classes, what are students talking about?

   When students are on task but are not responding to one another, what are they talking about? When students are responding, what types of response do they offer?

The goal of this study is to develop some ideas about how instructional goals and contexts for response groups relate to what students actually talk about in these groups and to identify what kinds of peer talk may be more and less productive.

The Role of Peer Talk in Learning to Write

On the basis of studying teaching-learning interactions outside classrooms, Cazden (1986, 1988) suggests that peers use talk as a way to help them consider different perspectives, relate to an audience and the needs of another, and explore ideas in process. Working together, peers can both receive and give advice, both ask and answer questions, and assume the role of both novice and expert. Acceptance of this Vygotskian (1978, 1986) premise, that the genesis of reasoning for

oneself lies in social interaction, prompts one to advocate building instructional environments rich in peer talk.[2]

A number of researchers indicate that social interactions that support learning are far less likely to occur in school-based learning than in out-of-school settings (e.g., Greenfield, 1984; Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1984). In traditional classrooms, where whole-class discussions predominate, there is little time for students to talk since teachers typically ask known-answer questions and rarely give those few students who get the floor an opportunity to develop ideas of their own (Dillon, 1984; Mehan, 1979). In writing instruction, extensive use of peer groups fits well with classrooms reorganized to deemphasize the whole-class, teacher-dominant model and to emphasize structures that provide time for students to talk about academic topics and engage in social interactions that can support their writing and learning.

Writing teachers and theorists, in their search for how to integrate peer talk with writing instruction, have often discussed the merits of peer response groups (e.g., Beaven, 1977; Bruffee, 1978, 1984, 1985; Elbow, 1973, 1981; Gere, 1987; Hawkins, 1976; Healy, 1980; Macrorie, 1979; Moffett & Wagner, 1983; Perl & Wilson, 1986). Nevertheless, disagreement remains about optimal ways to organize them. For example, Moffett (1968) and Moffett and Wagner (1983) suggested that student-readers be instructed to coach student-writers, while Elbow (1973, 1981) and Perl and Wilson (1986) emphasized the importance of the writer's maintaining control of and guiding peer response. Regardless of how groups are organized, all agree that students should work together to help one another and thereby should form a collaborative unit, with several students providing input to the issues under discussion. In this collaborative ideal, different students are knowledgeable about different aspects of writing, and each contributes in some way. In this vision lies the strength of the group process, with students able to play the multiple roles suggested by Cazden (1986, 1988).

In spite of the theoretical support for the potential of peer response and in spite of the vision of teachers and theorists about what ideally transpires in groups, only a few studies have explored what actually happens when students gather together to talk about their writing. These studies present conflicting findings (see Gere & Abbott [1985], Gere & Stevens [1985], Nystrand [1986], and Nystrand & Brandt [1989] for positive discussions of peer response groups as compared with Newkirk [1984] for a discussion of the contradictions between peer and

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[2]For a fuller discussion of the Vygotskian theoretical underpinnings for response groups in the writing classroom see DiPardo and Freedman (1988). Some of the discussion in this section and the literature review that follows is condensed from that article.

teacher response and Berkenkotter [1984] for a negative discussion of groups). With the exception of Gere and her colleagues, who studied fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders, these studies are of college-age students, and only Nystrand gives information about the context surrounding the groups. All in all, the literature reveals little about the conditions that allow response groups to accomplish what theory says they can, especially at the secondary level where response groups are commonly advocated in the professional literature.

Method

The Participants

The Teachers

Mary Lee Glass of Gunn High School in Palo Alto, California, and Art Peterson of Lowell High School in San Francisco taught the two classes in the study. Each had over twenty years of teaching experience, were active professionally, and were published writers. Both worked to implement current thinking about teaching writing, including current thinking about peer groups. Both considered peer talk crucial to writing development and were committed to using groups.

These teachers were selected from a pool of 17 secondary school English teachers recommended by Bay Area Writing Project directors for their success as writing teachers. The selection process involved observing one ninth-grade class of each of the recommended teachers and conducting two interviews about their philosophy of teaching writing and their use of varied kinds of response to writing. Of the observed teachers, Glass and Peterson stood out because they used groups, and their students, when working in groups, seemed to be on-task and engaged.

Glass and Peterson also provided interesting contrasts in the ways they used groups. Glass relied on response groups for her teaching whereas Peterson relied mostly on teacher-student conferences, even though he still used groups frequently and for multiple purposes besides response. In addition, when Peterson set up groups, he usually framed the group tasks more specifically than Glass did.

The Classes and Students

Both classes were semester-long, ninth-grade, college-preparatory English. Glass's class, an honors course in communication, focused on writing and speaking. Peterson's regular English class focused on literature and writing.

Glass's 33 students came from a middle- and upper-middle-class community. There were 12 boys and 21 girls. Most were the children of Stanford University faculty or of executives in Silicon Valley, with a smaller number coming from an upwardly mobile, blue-collar neighborhood. Since Lowell, where Peterson taught, is the academic high school for the San Francisco Unified School District, it draws students from the entire city and from the wealthiest to the poorest of San Francisco families. Mirroring the school demographics, the great majority of Peterson's class—21 out of 27 students—were female.

Data Collection

Two research assistants and I observed groups that occurred during a sequence of three writing assignments in each class. In Glass's class the assignments included: (a) an account of an interview with a fellow student, to introduce the student to the class; (b) a paper about an interesting place which Glass called a "saturation report"; and (c) an "opinion" essay on a controversial issue. This sequence was designed to move students from the concrete topic about the fellow student to the more abstract topic of an issue about which they had opinions. In Peterson's class all three of the papers were discussions of people's characters. They included: (a) a character study of a friend or acquaintance; (b) a character study of a well-known contemporary figure, someone the students might read about in the popular press but not someone the students knew personally; and (c) a character study of one of the figures in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Each study was more distanced from the everyday life of the writer than the one before. In Glass's class the assignment sequence lasted for ten weeks and in Peterson's for seven weeks.

In both classes two and sometimes three observers were present every day during the entire assignment sequence. Small group meetings that occurred during these sequences were audio taped, with a separate recorder placed with each group. Throughout this article, the term *meeting* refers to individual group meetings; the term *session* refers to the time a number of small groups met simultaneously. Generally, only one session of groups assembled during a single class period; however, there were times when more than one session assembled during the same class period. Usually, there were six or seven groups meeting during each session.

The primary data include tape recordings and selected transcriptions of all groups occurring during the period of observation. Secondary data include: (a) field notes taken daily in each classroom, (b) daily video and audio tapes of whole-class discussions, (c) materials pre-

pared by the teachers, (d) available samples of student writing, (e) interviews and notes of casual conversations with selected students and with teachers, and (f) a written statement of teaching philosophy from each teacher. Detail about the ethnographic note taking and the recording and interview procedures can be found in Freedman (1987, pp. 42–45).

Data Analysis

From the Outside In

The first research question focused on how response groups fit into each teachers' overall plan for teaching writing. The question was answered by determining (a) the frequency of groups used for response to student writing as compared to groups used to fulfill other functions, (b) the frequency of response occurring in groups as compared to response occurring in other contexts, and (c) the ways the two teachers organized the response groups as exemplified by an in-depth look at how they directed one response group session during one of the assignments in the sequence.

Group Functions. Determining the frequency of response groups as compared to other types of groups first involved classifying all group sessions according to their functions. To determine function categories, a research assistant and I looked at how the teachers set up the group sessions, in particular at the directions they gave the students about what they were to do during their group meetings. We settled on three major functions for the group sessions: responding to writing, composing collaboratively, and thinking collaboratively. Then, working independently, we assigned each group session to one of these categories. Next, the teachers were given the list of categories the researchers had devised and were asked whether the categories made sense to them. They agreed that the category system was valid. Then they were asked to assign each session in their class to a function category. Given almost complete agreement between the teachers and the research team, this procedure yielded the three categories of group functions as well as the relative frequency of the different functions in the two classrooms.

Response group sessions fell into the category of responding to writing. In these sessions students had composed something outside class and brought it to a group session for the purpose of receiving feedback—presumably (and sometimes this was made explicit in the teacher's instructions) to take the feedback into account during subsequent revising. Feedback could occur on a draft (or a section of a paper in

progress) or on material intended to serve as a practice exercise (e.g., paragraphs or focus sentences that were not necessarily intended as part of the final paper). The nature of the feedback was sometimes structured by the teachers' guidelines, which ranged from written directions for peer response specified on dittoed sheets (given to each student to fill out after listening to another's paper) to oral suggestions as to what peers might want to listen for during the reading aloud of one another's work.

Response Contexts. To determine the relative frequency of response in groups in comparison to other types of response students received, three members of the research team identified and coded all response incidents during one assignment sequence in each classroom (the coder rotation schedule and reliability statistics are reported in Freedman, 1987, pp. 94–96). Response incidents were defined as follows: each peer group meeting involving one of four focal students in each class was counted as one response incident; written comments on a single piece of focal-student writing counted as one incident; each individual conference with a focal student counted as one incident; and each topically-related chunk of response talk during whole class meetings counted as one incident.

Response incidents were coded for the two assignment sequences that were most equal in length across classrooms. The selected assignment in Glass's class was the "saturation report" about an interesting place. It lasted for four and one-half weeks of 50-minute periods. The sequence in Peterson's class was the character sketch of a friend or acquaintance. It lasted for five weeks of 45-minute periods. In each classroom, the following data were coded: field notes collected during classroom observations and supplemented with the videotapes each day, audiotapes of groups involving focal students, and written comments on focal student writing. The critical coding was for the context of each response incident (whether it occurred during a whole group meeting, was a peer group meeting, or a teacher-student conference) and the recipient of the response (whether an individual or a group of writers was involved).

Group Organization. The analysis of group organization included a description of the teachers' directions for setting up the first observed session in each classroom, the teachers' monitoring of the session, other classroom talk surrounding and structuring it, the nature of the group task, and the nature of the writing task. The first session is also described for each teacher. For Peterson's class, since the organization of response group sessions varied from one occasion to the next (e.g.,

response sheets varied as did response activities), a brief account of contrasting later groups is provided as well.

From the Inside Out

The second research question focused on what students were talking about inside groups in these classes. This analysis was based on data from only the videotapes and audiotapes; it did not include data from the students' writing. For this analysis, the data set was reduced to include a subset of the responding-to-writing meetings, those that occurred during sessions organized by "response sheets," dittoed directions given by the teacher that were intended to structure the group talk. In Peterson's class two of the four responding-to-writing sessions were organized by these written directions: one on the anecdotes preliminary to the character analysis of a friend or acquaintance (session 03-5) and the other for drafts of the analysis of a character from *Great Expectations* (session 06-5). In Glass's class four of the nine responding-to-writing sessions were organized in this way: one on the interview (session 03-1); two on drafts of saturation reports, continued from one day to the next (sessions 08-2 and 08-3); and one on drafts of the opinion papers (session 10-5). In all, 12 group meetings were analyzed in Peterson's class, six for each of the two responding-to-writing sessions, and 25 in Glass's class, seven for the first of the sessions and six for the last three—for a total of 37 group meetings in the two classes.

Responding-to-writing sessions that were not organized by response sheets were eliminated for three reasons. First, eliminating them makes close comparisons across the classrooms possible since the analysis focuses on relatively parallel groups. Second, sessions without sheets in Peterson's class included substantial amounts of uninteresting off-task talk. For example, an analysis of all six groups meeting during one of these sessions (01-5) in Peterson's class revealed that students spent an average only six of the allotted 12 minutes on the task, one group giving the response work as little as 3.5 minutes. This off-task talk included topics such as weekend plans, friends, hair coloring, or jokes. By contrast, students in groups with response sheets spent at most a few turns talking about such entirely off-task topics. Third, the on-task talk in Peterson's groups without response sheets was not particularly interesting. Students read one another their paragraphs, and on the whole the peer-audience offered only phatic feedback (that is, they shared feelings but not ideas, as when Lisa said, "That's good. I like it," after Geraldine read her paragraph).

To establish patterns in the conversations in the 37 group meetings directed by response sheets, a research assistant and I analyzed the

talk, using procedures established by Corsaro (1985). Following Corsaro, in the first, most global phase of the analysis, we identified preliminary categories of talk and posed hypotheses about student interactions. During this phase we reviewed and made detailed notes about the substance of the talk for the 37 response group meetings. To identify the categories in the data, we first worked independently and then compared and came to agreement on our descriptions. The second phase involved transcribing selected portions of the group talk and then performing a more detailed analysis to verify categories identified in the first phase and to elaborate the hypotheses. Again, working first independently and then together, we identified a stabilized set of categories. During this process we were careful to transcribe possible counterexamples, attempting to find those cases that might contradict our hypotheses. When we found contradictory cases, we reformulated the hypotheses to account for the contradictions. These procedures yielded a description of the peer group discourse patterns that characterized talk inside response groups in these two classrooms.

Once the categories had been identified, a subset of the data was analyzed to determine their relative frequency. For this part of the analysis, four typical group meetings from each classroom were selected: one meeting from each of the four sessions in Glass's class and two from each of the two sessions in Peterson's. Besides representing the range of sessions, the selected meetings included varied student participants. A research assistant and I transcribed and coded all talk in these eight groups. For the coding, we divided the talk into episodes, according to major topic shifts. We then independently coded each episode with one of the category labels that emerged during the analysis of the entire corpus of 37 groups. The episode boundaries and coding labels proved easy to identify, with agreement between the coders of 91%. In the few cases of disagreement, we quickly and easily came to agreement after discussing the nature of the talk. After all episodes had been coded, we counted each type of episode and calculated the percentage of occurrence of each type across the total set of episodes for the 37 groups. Even though individual episodes varied in length, they varied for all types of episodes. Across the data, the percentage of occurrence for the episodes provided as accurate a sense of the amount of talk during each type of episode as counting turns or words within episodes would have.

A separate analysis is provided for the category of self-response during reading, when students responded to their own writing while they read their papers aloud. The analysis is separate because this type of response occurred almost exclusively in Glass's class; in Peterson's

class, the very fast pace of the group work and the circumscribed kinds of tasks groups engaged in seemed to lead students either not to read aloud or rarely to stop to respond to themselves when they did. In Glass's class, self-response included several important subcategories. A research assistant and I coded these subcategories for each instance of self-response for all six groups meeting during one of Glass's sessions, 08-2, when self-response was particularly pronounced. We also coded peer response to the self-response; as writers responded to their own writing, they often implicitly asked for peer feedback. All findings for these six group meetings on 08-2 were then checked across Glass's three other sessions.

Results from the Outside In

Group Functions

How frequently did response groups occur compared to other kinds of groups? Table 1 shows the frequency of responding to writing, composing collaboratively, and thinking collaboratively—the three functions for these groups. Across the ten weeks of observation in Glass's class, nine of the 17 group sessions or 53% focused on response to student writing, with two of these nine sessions focused mostly on editing for mechanics and spelling. By contrast, in Peterson's class, of the 16 group sessions across the seven-week period, only four or 25% were devoted to response to student writing, and none involved editing.

Response Contexts

How frequently did students receive response in response groups as compared to response in other settings? As Table 2 shows, the counts of response incidents in varied contexts in the two classrooms reveal

Table 1

Assignment of Group Sessions to Function Categories

	Glass's Class (N=17)	Peterson's Class (N=16)
Group Function		
Responding to writing	9 (53%)	4 (25%)
Composing collaboratively	7 (41%)	4 (25%)
Thinking collaboratively	1 (6%)	8 (50%)

Table 2

Response Incidents across the Classrooms

Context	Percentage of Response Incidents within Each Classroom		Tests of Significant Difference	
	Glass (N=191)	Peterson (N=276)	Chi Square	Post Hoc Z
Context				
Whole class	44.5	21.0		5.40*
Peer group	36.6	31.9		1.05
Teacher-student conference	18.8	47.1	46.44** (df=2)	-6.86*
Recipient				
Individual Writer	36.1	51.8		
Group of Writers	63.9	48.2	11.19* (df=1)	

**p<.001.   *p<.01.

Note: A Karl Pearson Chi-Square Test of Homogeneity assesses the difference across the two classrooms. When this omnibus test shows significance and there are more than two levels of a variable, post hoc pair-wise comparisons (Z tests) between the two teachers are made on each level of the variable.

that students received response in significantly different contexts across the two settings. In Glass's class the most frequent context for response was the whole-class lesson, followed by the response group. By contrast, in Peterson's class the most frequent context was the individual conference, with the response group a more distant second than for Glass. Not surprisingly, then, as Table 2 also shows, in Peterson's class students were more likely to receive response as individuals, while in Glass's class they were more likely to be with a group of other students. In spite of these differences with respect to individual conferences and whole-class response, students in the two classrooms received similar amounts of response during peer group meetings.

Even though both teachers organized their classes so that approximately one-third of the response occurred during groups, Glass, unlike Peterson, considered response groups central to her curriculum. They fit particularly well with her philosophy of teaching writing. In her written statement on her teaching philosophy, she explained the reasoning behind her use of groups:

The student of writing must learn to evaluate—his own, her peers', the masters' writing. . . . the trick, then, is to find ways to allow students to evaluate their own work, for, after all, they will be on their own when they leave a particular classroom and must succeed or fail in the next writing situation on their own.

In peer response groups Glass expected students to practice evaluating and criticizing constructively and thereby to think about their own revisions. Response groups were meant to help writers develop skills of independent evaluation.

Although Peterson used response groups, his main response mode, the conference, insured that individuals received response to their in-process drafts (see Table 2). Unlike Glass, Peterson crafted response events to help his students achieve more than they could on their own (Sperling [1990] contains a full study of Peterson's conferences).

Group Organization

How did each teacher organize and direct response groups? Detailed analysis of the context surrounding the first observed group session in each classroom, and in Peterson's class a briefer account of contrasting later sessions, illustrate the contrasting ways the teachers organized and directed their groups. The example from Glass's class is for a session in which students used response sheets while Peterson's first session is one in which they did not, a session that, therefore, is eliminated from the second part of the data analysis. In spite of this difference, these sessions provide typical examples of how each teacher organized response groups, with Peterson's later sessions filling out the picture.

Glass

For the first response group session in Glass's classroom, students met in self-selected groups for 34 minutes of a 50-minute lesson. During the previous two weeks, each student had been gathering data about another student in the class in preparation for an "interview" paper, the first major assignment of the semester which was prepared as a speech to the class and then as a written piece. By the time this response group session took place, students had put their interview material into a rough draft. Before the session began, Glass handed students a dittoed sheet with the following guideline questions which asked them to express what they thought about the quality of one another's writing.

What did you think of the introduction? wow, good, ok, ho-hum Why?

What is the most interesting part of the paper? Why?

What is the part that needs the most work? Why?

Help the writer identify any places where there is not enough "showing" or too much showing.

Other comments:

Identify the focus of the paper as you understood it:

In the preceding weeks, the students had been practicing many of the same evaluative skills on one another's speeches that the dittoed sheets now asked them to apply on one another's writing. Specifically, after students gave speeches, the other students in the class, sitting at their desks, each completed a sheet to evaluate the speech and to give to the speaker. Glass did not have students directly practice working together in groups, but she prepared them by intertwining the activities they did before the groups with those they were to do in the groups.

Glass set up the group session with instructions to students about specific procedures to follow when working together. Student writers were directed: "Read your paper aloud, clearly, distinctly, and thinking about it as you're reading. If you hear something you don't like while you're reading, just make a mark next to it, and carry on reading." Listeners were told: "Fill out the editing sheet and think about how you as an audience might help the writer to make it a better paper" and as an aside were told, "if you want to make verbal comments about what you hear, that's okay too." Except for an occasional interruption in the group's work to clarify points on the dittoed sheets and to answer questions raised by individual students, Glass did not participate in peer-group activity. When students asked questions, she usually tried to get them to find their own answers. In the group meetings, following Glass's instructions, the students took turns reading their papers. At the end of the session student writers collected the response sheets their peers had completed about their drafts. Glass reminded students of the due date for their final drafts, accompanied by their rough drafts and the response sheets.

The key features of Glass's response group activity were: (a) more than half of a class period devoted to peer-together work; (b) the presence of detailed dittoed directions for the response designed to prompt group members to provide one another with feedback towards revising

and reshaping their drafts and with a focus on written rather than oral commentary; (c) a focus on the evaluative role of the listener; and (d) the presence of special technical vocabulary: "showing," "the focus," "the introduction."

Peterson

In Peterson's class, the first response group session took place at the end of the first week of observation. Peterson assigned students to small groups at the start of the semester, and for the most part the members were constant for all group activities, regardless of their function. By the time of this session, the groups were used to working together.

On this day, students met in their groups for 12 minutes out of a 45-minute class period. The past week's activity had encompassed a range of tasks: students talked both in groups and out about details to be observed about the protagonist Thornhill in a clip from the opening of the movie, North by Northwest; about details of the appearance and personality of a character in Great Expectations; about the difference between opinion and observation; about the connection between what a character might do and what kind of a person the character might be. Earlier in the week Peterson instructed students to write a paragraph about a character in Great Expectations using details from the novel, in preparation for one of the semester's major projects, a long paper about a Great Expectations character. This paragraph formed the basis for this response group session. Before students arranged themselves into groups, Peterson wrote two sentences on the board:

Henry does everything backwards.

Because Henry does everything backwards, others find it difficult to live with him.

Peterson told his students that these were possible topic sentences for a paragraph about a character and asked them to consider the difference in how the two would function as topic sentences. He then used students' responses (e.g., "The second one goes further than the first", "It tells about the effect") as springboards for directing group "response" work in which he asked students "to look at the topic sentences" and "consider whether or not it's simply a sentence of the kind 'Henry does everything backwards,' a simple statement of the way he behaves, or a statement that says something about how he behaves and a little bit more . . . either the cause, effect, some other kind of relationship to his behavior."

Students worked together while Peterson moved from one group to the next, contributing to peer comments. As the class time drew to a

close, Peterson brought groups back into whole-class discussion, asking for examples of "strong topic sentences" that students had heard from one another's paragraphs. As the lesson ended, Peterson noted that the groups were often off task and expressed disappointment about the way the groups were going. He then collected the students' paragraphs, not to grade them, but "to see how you're getting on."

Like this session, the two response group sessions in Peterson's class guided by response sheets were less explicitly aimed at getting students to help one another revise than were those in Glass's class. Rather, students were to pool information about a given piece of writing. For a character anecdote, students were asked to use the following questions:

1. What word, not used in the selection, describes the character trait the writer portrays with this anecdote?

2. Which words or sentences most suggest this trait?

3. What words or sentences seem out of place?

4. What word does the writer use to describe his subject's character?

For a character sketch based on *Great Expectations*, students were given the following guidelines:

List the TWO or THREE characteristics the writer attributes to this character. What is the MOST SPECIFIC EVIDENCE he or she provides? Is this evidence CONVINCING and to the point?

Writer's name:

Character:

Characteristic one:
  Most specific evidence:
    Is it convincing?

Characteristic two:
  Most specific evidence:
    Is it convincing?

Characteristic three:
  Most specific evidence:
    Is it convincing?

[and so on for each writer to whom the student was about to listen]

Thus, students could remind one another of material potentially useful to the writer, and they could give their opinions by noting if they found something "out of place" (question 3, anecdote sheet) or "convincing" (*Great Expectations* sheet). In his statement of teaching philosophy Peterson writes that when he uses groups, he "set[s] up some

friendly competition with students in other response groups" and "normally ask[s] them to perform specific, usually non-evaluative tasks" such as: "Identify the strongest opening sentence from the essays in your group. Enter it in competition against the opening sentences of the other groups."

The key features of Peterson's peer groups were: (a) in comparison to Glass's, a relative brevity of the peer-together activity; (b) an emphasis on oral response during groups in contrast to Glass's directions that asked students also to write to one another; (c) the feedback from group work into whole-class discussion in contrast to Glass's groups which did not report back to the class since students were writing for individual authors; (d) tasks that involved "picking out" a feature such as a paragraph's topic sentence and evaluating it with respect to a model, a specific and finite task, compared to Glass's more global evaluative task; (e) consistent with Peterson's more specific focus, the presence of concepts dealing with connection (e.g., the "strong" topic sentence is the one that hints at the direction of a piece of writing); (f) a problem-solving focus even during responding-to-writing groups; and (g) Peterson's greater presence in these groups.

Results from the Inside Out

Looking from the inside out, the focus narrows to only those groups in the two classrooms that were guided by response sheets (three sessions of six group meetings and one session of seven group meetings in Glass's class and two sessions of six group meetings each in Peterson's class, for a total of 37 group meetings). These data form the basis for finding patterns in group talk and answer the second research question: "Inside groups in these classes, what were students talking about?" Student talk inside these groups is described either as sheet-based, directly prompted by the teacher-constructed sheets, or as non-sheet based, that is spontaneous and independent of the sheets.

Sheet-Based Talk

Other than talk about procedures (e.g., "let's get started now," or "you read yours first"), sheet-based talk involved students in: (a) avoiding directions to evaluate one another negatively, (b) collaborating to complete the sheets in order to get the work done in ways that would preserve their relationships with their classmates and that would satisfy the teacher, and (c) discussing the substance of one another's writing as directed by the sheets.

Avoiding Negative Evaluation

In both classes the response sheets asked students to evaluate one another's writing even though this was not the focus or explicit intent of either of Peterson's sheets. In both classes students avoided this task. The first dittoed sheets from Peterson's class directed students to respond to anecdotes they wrote about friends or acquaintances in preparation for the first of the three character sketches. Students refused to answer the only question that implicitly called for evaluation: "What words or sentences seem out of place?"

> Vicki: [about Liz's anecdote] What sentences are out of place?
>
> Rhonda: None!
>
> Vicki: So you're going to put "none"?
>
> Rhonda: Yeah.
>
> (03-5)
>
> Mike: I'm not going to say anything's out of place. Okay?
>
> Donald: Yeah. Everything's great. Perfect!
>
> [both laugh]
>
> (03-5)

Glass's students behaved similarly. Her dittoed sheets explicitly requested peer-listeners to note a draft's strengths as well as its weaknesses. Students thought they must write something negative on the sheet, but they explained to their peers that they were doing this because they thought Glass expected it but that they did not believe what they had written. For example, Jeannie gave Sally her commentary about her saturation report and apologized, "Sorry, I had to put a 'no' in there somewhere" (08-2).

Writers as well as peer-listeners were on guard to stop negative evaluation. Writers tended to defend their drafts against the comments on the evaluation sheets. Julie's draft of her interview with a fellow student included a description of a classmate who is ethnically mixed. Julie claimed that this ethnic mixture made the classmate especially creative. Cindy did not see how the ethnic mixture related to Julie's point about the classmate's "creativity":

> Julie: Oh, see the, you know, the part about the half-Indian, I thought that, that was uh because, you know, she's creative because of that. But I don't know how to explain that.
>
> Cindy: I don't know. That doesn't seem . . . all of a sudden, I saw, I heard this . . . how come that's there?

> Julie: I only put it there because I liked that.
>
> Cindy: Fine. I'm not going to underline anything.
>
> (03-1)

Cindy's "I'm not going to underline anything" referred to the evaluation sheet's direction to underline a sentence that needed more work. Cindy's reassurance to Julie was occasioned by Julie's defensiveness regarding Cindy's comments on her draft about the relevance of the part about the "half-Indian."

Likewise, in Peterson's class the writer Donald helped Mike see how convincing the evidence was that he presented about his character from *Great Expectations*:

> [Donald has just read his paper about Joe Gargery, the blacksmith.]
>
> Mike: Timid. What is that?
>
> Donald: Too timid.
>
> Mike: What is your most specific evidence for that?
>
> Donald: I don't know.
>
> Mike: What did you write?
>
> Donald: Doesn't talk back to Mrs. Joe.
>
> Mike: All right.
>
> Donald: Or he'll get beat up.
>
> Mike: That's pretty convincing. I'm convinced. I'm convinced that's convincing. I'll write "sort of."
>
> Donald: I'll change it.
>
> Mike: No way.
>
> Donald: I'll say, "Hell, isn't it convincing."
>
> Mike: No way. I'll write, "Hell no man." There that's good enough.
>
> Donald: See if you write no, that isn't too good.
>
> Mike: That's sort of—
>
> Donald: Sort of is like a major (unclear).
>
> Mike: I'll go, "Is it convincing, you kidding?"
>
> Donald: Get outa here. Buddy, you're real funny.
>
> Mike: I'll go, "It's so unconvincing I fell asleep."
>
> (06-5)

In the off chance that Mike might even begin to think of saying something negative, Donald prompted him ahead of time to give the most positive possible reply, that Donald's evidence is "convincing."

Table 3

Episodes and Kinds of Peer Talk in Group Meetings Using Response Sheets

	Peterson (N = 46)						Class (N = 66)					
	Individual Groups				Total	% of Episodes	Individual Groups				Total	% of Episodes
SHEET-BASED TALK TO:												
Avoid negative evaluation	1	-	-	1	2	4%	5	4	-	2	11	17%
Get work done	9	3	3	6	18	39%	4	1	5	6	16	24%
Discuss substance	3	-	4	4	11	24%	4	4	1	3	12	18%
Subtotal:	10	3	7	11	31	67%	13	9	6	11	39	59%
SPONTANEOUS TALK ABOUT:												
Form/mechanics	2	-	3	-	5	11%	3	3	2	1	9	14%
Content:												
phatic	-	2	-	1	3	7%	1	3	-	3	7	11%
non-phatic	-	-	-	-	-	0%	3	2	1	1	7	11%
Other, task related (grades/doing work)	1	2	-	2	5	11%	-	1	-	2	3	5%
Other, non-task related (social life)	1	-	-	1	2	4%	1	-	-	-	1	2%
Subtotal:	4	4	3	4	15	33%	8	6	3	7	27	43%
TOTALS:	14	7	10	15	46	100%	21	18	9	18	66	102%*

*This percentage does not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Table 3 shows the relative frequency of episodes of each category of talk across the eight selected group meetings. Avoiding negative evaluation was the focus of a greater percentage of the episodes in Glass's selected groups (17%) than in Peterson's (4%). This finding is not surprising, since Glass's response sheets called more explicitly for evaluation than Peterson's; in her class there was more evaluation to be avoided.

Collaborating to Get the Work Done

Related to avoiding negative evaluation was the negotiation between writers and listeners about completing the sheets to the satisfaction of both parties. During these moments, students collaborated not to discuss the tasks elicited by the sheets but rather just to get the work done in a socially acceptable way. As with avoiding negative evaluation, students here too avoided the task of responding to one another's writing. In both classrooms, listeners got the writer to help them complete the sheet. In Glass's class, Karen asked the writer, Julie, for help with her saturation report:

[Julie reads]

Karen: Can you read your intro, introduction again?

[Julie reads introduction]

Karen: What is that—

Julie: That has nothing to do with my, my topic. My focus is in the second paragraph.

Karen: Oh.

Julie: Just a sec.

Karen: Okay, well that's good. Oh, could then, could you read the focus . . .?

(08-2)

Likewise, in Peterson's class, Gina told her group how to complete the sheet on her *Great Expectations* piece about Magwitch:

Gina: Do you want me to read or just tell you?

Liz: Just tell us.

Rhonda: What's his two characteristics?

Gina: Noble and clever.

Rhonda: Okay, what about "cleverness"?

Gina: When he first reveals himself to Pip, and he comes in as a stranger at the Blue Boar, and he mixes his drink with a file.

Liz: Oh, the file, yeah.

Gina: It's a like clever way to reveal yourself. Noble and clever, noble and clever. I've only said that like about forty-five times!

(06-5)

As Table 3 shows, the largest percentage of episodes in the sampled groups in both classes involved this kind of collaboration, 39% for Peterson's class and 24% for Glass's.

Discussing the Substance of the Writing

Students also spent some of their time straightforwardly responding, discussing the substance of their writing as the sheets directed. Given that both Glass and Peterson designed the sheets to stimulate the students to spend their group time in this way, students devoted relatively few of the sampled episodes to this kind of discussion. As Table 3 reveals, only 24% of the episodes in Peterson's class and 18% in Glass's fell into this category.

Importantly, however, in Peterson's class many of the episodes that began while students were collaborating just to get the work done turned into discussions of the substance of the writing, and these discussions generally centered around issues of content. For example, as the groups discussed the evidence for the characteristics in the *Great Expectations* sketches, as the sheets directed, their mutual familiarity with *Great Expectations* sometimes led to suggestions about additional information the writer could use:

[Geraldine has just read her paper about Herbert Pocket.]

Val: Okay, the first example showed that he was kind and the second that he was loyal?

Geraldine: Yeah.

Lisa: Except you might want to put in a contrast, he's sort of kind to everybody.

Val: What about when he loses his money? He's stupid with money.

Geraldine: That could be one.

(06-5)

In a similar vein, Mike suggested that Donald elaborate his ideas:

Mike: How come you use so little things from the book, man?

Donald: I used a lot. Look. He's helpful, timid.

Mike: Okay. Timid. Here, look, I'm nice man [shows Donald a

place in the text of *Great Expectations* which discusses Joe further]. He's good-natured, he doesn't complain.

Donald: I guess I could put more stuff in.

(06-5)

In the process of pooling information to complete the sheet, Peterson's students reminded one another of material potentially useful to the writer. In Peterson's class this sheet-based talk about content-based substance seemed highly productive.

Glass's evaluation sheets directed her students somewhat less specifically than Peterson's. However, when her sheets asked students about "the most interesting/the best part" of a draft, her students interpreted the question to refer to issues of technique the class had been discussing; for example, the best or worst part might be the way the paper was focused. Although the actual topics Glass's students raised were similar to those Peterson's group raised, Glass's students, like their teacher, identified areas of concern and asked questions of the writer but did not provide one another with specific advice. Julie asked Anne to identify her focus in her saturation report on Stanford University's center quad and then suggested that Anne support this central point:

Julie: Okay, so is your, your focus is on center quad, right?

Anne: Yeah.

Julie: But what's the focus?

Anne: It's the kind of place where you go to read, relax, study, eat, or just—

Julie: Do you explain why?

Anne: Not, not really.

Julie: Can you explain why maybe?

Anne: Okay. Yeah, well I'll have to change it a lot.

Julie: Don't worry. Mine is, mine is just so bad.

Karen: So's mine.

(08-2)

Anne went away knowing that Julie thought she needed to provide more examples for her focusing ideas in her saturation report, but she did not engage in specific discussion about the kinds of examples she might give.

Spontaneous Talk

Spontaneous discussions in these sheet-based groups arose mainly

about: (a) the format and mechanics of a piece of writing and (b) the content of the writing. Not elaborated are two categories that occurred relatively infrequently and that did not involve response to student writing; on-task talk about other academic issues (11% in Peterson's class and 5% in Glass's) and talk on purely social matters (only 4% in Peterson's class and 2% in Glass's) (see Table 3).

Format/Mechanics

In both classes students spontaneously initiated discussions about format and mechanics, 14% of the episodes on Table 3 in Glass's class and 11% in Peterson's. Format included issues such as whether to double space, where to put one's name, whether there should be a title, how many words one should write. Mechanics included talk about where to put commas, subject-verb agreement, how to spell particular words, issues of syntax.

When students talked about mechanics, they often made up rules, as did Karen and Julie when they discussed their saturation reports:

Karen: I'm not sure if this should be "was" or "were."
Julie: "Was" is for one, and "were" is for many.
Karen: I know, but what if it has like—I have "were" and then I have one thing.
Julie: Okay, read it out loud.
Karen: Okay.
[reads] "A couple of times when I witnessed this unending action were at snack time and on the playground."
Julie: I think you should have a comma right there cause I got confused.
Jeannie: "Were" is better.
Julie: Yeah, just put a comma right there so we know.
(08-3)

Similarly, Meryl was reading her opinion essay, and Julie interrupted twice.

Julie: Meryl! Meryl! You shouldn't say "you."
Rebecca: Can't you put "you"?
Meryl: What am I talking about?
Julie: You have to say . . . well, like "high school students or something."
(10-5)

It is striking how students used "rules" to justify their comments.

Sometimes, as in Karen, Julie, and Jeannie's discussion about "was" versus "were," the "rule" employed is part of the grammar of English; on other occasions, the "rule" is derived from some other source as is the case for Julie's "you shouldn't use you." Other groups came up with equally inappropriate rules: "Don't use IS!" and "Always put the focus of your paper in the first sentence." When students commented on issues of mechanics or format in peer response groups, this rule-governed approach was usual.

Peterson's students talked mostly about format, but when they talked about mechanics, their talk had a similar flavor to Glass's students'. For example, Rhonda reprimanded Gina with a made-up rule that papers should have two paragraphs: "You don't have two paragraphs" (06-5).

Content

In both classes, response to content occurred as phatic remarks, usually when listeners interjected positive comments during or after the reading of a draft. Sometimes listeners reacted simply by laughing in appropriate places, or giving positive but non-substantive commentary (e.g., mmm-hmm!, uh-huh!, mmm!, huh!). Sometimes, the appreciation was non-phatic or more completely verbalized ideas, as in the following excerpt when Meryl was reading from her opinion paper:

Meryl: [reading] ". . . this one girl never played soccer in her life and she made it on the varsity team. But the team won zero games."
[Rebecca and Julie laugh; Meryl joins in and then continues reading.]
"Unlike public schools, private schools don't have a lot of spirit since the team always loses—"
Rebecca: Really?
Meryl: Yeah! Nobody goes to the games!
[reading] "At my public school, however, I was on the soccer and tennis teams and we came in first and second place—"
Rebecca: Cool!
Julie: Yeah.
[Meryl laughs and continues reading.]
(10-5)

Across the data there are other, more fully developed and non-phatic, instances of content-focused discussion in Glass's class. For example,

Sally began by reading her draft of her saturation report about a bookstore with a coffee-house inside. As she read, she interrupted herself with oral elaboration about what she saw and heard. Her peer audience joined in.

Sally: [reading] ". . . this woman is representing the downfall of other women. She's stuffed into polyester pants and a T-shirt, has a permanently displeased look on her face, and it looks as though she's smelled sour milk whenever she lays eyes on her child. 'No books! I don't want you to get no books!' The look in the boy's eyes is heart-rending, he's learned not to plead." I wanted to- it was so sad, he just looked and she goes, "No books! I don't want you to have no books! Never no books!" And this little boy's sitting there going (wails)

Jarett: That's sad.

Marianne: That's horrible. Usually, it's so nice that a kid wants a book.

Sally: And he had picked out an interesting one.

Marianne: And usually you have to listen to the kid saying, yes, Mommy, please.

Jarett: Yeah.

Marianne: I like the polyester pants, I know what you mean. It's so gross.

Sally: Okay, here's my last section.
[reads]

(08-2)

As this excerpt shows, Sally's interest in the content of her writing overflowed into her re-dramatization of the mother's intransigence and wrapped her peer audience into enthusiastic discussion of the event. Peer response seemed authentic and responders showed interest in Sally's narrative. This excerpt is typical of the relative ease with which students seemed able to offer one another spontaneous feedback on the content of their papers even when they were not discussing common experiences.

In Peterson's class discussions of content were more directly stimulated by the sheets and closely linked to them; spontaneous discussions of content did not appear. Even when student talk was not directly marked as answering questions on the sheets, in effect it did so. For example, immediately after Val finished reading about her Great

Expectations character and before the group turned to the sheets, Geraldine responded to Val:

Geraldine: You know your business-like theme when you say he clams up (unclear).

Val: Uh huh.

Geraldine: Is there some other sort of evidence that could support it stronger?

Lisa: The office, are you saying about the office?

Geraldine: That he clams up as soon as he gets there.

Val: Well he—

Geraldine: Works hard, but—

Val: But he won't express his personal views.

(06-5)

Notice that even though Geraldine had not yet turned to the sheets, her talk was clearly influenced by the questions the sheet posed about evidence for character traits, and so was coded as sheet-based.

Self-Response during Reading

The final type of talk important for understanding response inside these groups occurred in Glass's class only. It consisted of writers' self-evaluations while reading their writing aloud, reading aloud being a routine only in Glass's groups. Although this self-response during reading occurred when there were response sheets, it was not prompted by them. As Glass's students read aloud, they spontaneously interrupted their reading to comment on their writing. When listening to their talk, one can hear these students literally sense the presence of their audience.

Self-response fell into four subcategories:

1. *Explanation for the listener.* The writer interrupted him- or herself during reading to explain something about the content or the format of the piece about to be read. What the writer said never entailed a criticism of the writing or a request for feedback.

Jim: [reading] ". . . Sally likes to think of herself as someone who can help her friends."
You see I'm putting that in because of the nursing. She wants to be a nurse.
[continues reading]

(03-1)

2. *Identification of problem: Clarity.* The writer identified a problem of clarity in his or her draft while reading aloud, sometimes by a

question about the lucidity of what listeners had just heard and sometimes by a statement that the writing was muddled.

> Cindy: [reading] ". . . teenagers can be employed by several places especially"
> *This is such a mess. I don't know what I'm saying here. Wait. Can you understand that?*
> (10-5)

3. *Identification of problem: Specifics of form.* The writer identified a specific problem in the draft involving issues of presenting information, i.e., how to write a focus sentence, how to "make it longer," how to effect transitions, how to write an introduction or a conclusion. The difference between problems of form and those of clarity (see 2) were in the degree of specificity with which the writer labelled the problem. As with problems of clarity, the writer's identifications could be either a direct question to the peer-listeners or an assertion of difficulty.

> Jonathan: [reading] ". . . some benches and lots of grass for kids to run around on"
> *What's a focus sentence? I haven't got one here. It's just . . . can you guys? . . .*
> [continues reading]
> (08-2)

4. *Identification of problem: Content-focused wording or detail.* The writer identified a problem in the draft which related more to the content of the writing than to its form, i.e. problems of word choice which led to an unintended interpretation of the writer's ideas or problems with the appropriateness of particular details. The writer almost always used direct questions to the peer-listeners.

> Karen: [reading] ". . . from their clothes I could tell what kind of"
> *I don't know what to say—"what they'll be like when they're older—or something?*
> (08-2)

Not included in these categories is self-response about handwriting or spelling or instances of pure solidarity ritual (see Freedman & Bennett, 1987). Solidarity rituals occurred at the beginning and end of the students' reading "turns" when they tended to comment in a ritualist and negative way on the worth of their work (e.g., "This is so bad"; "That was awful").

Table 4 shows the frequency of each type of self-response during reading across the six groups meeting during session 08-2. When stu-

Table 4

Student Self-response: Listening to Oneself in Ms. Glass's Class

Types	number of occurrences across six groups	number leading to peer feedback
Explanation for the listener	21	n/a
Identification of problem: clarity	11	2 (18%)
Identification of problem: specifics of form	14	2 (14%)
Identification of problem: content-focused wording or detail	7	0
TOTAL for *Identification of problem* categories	32	4 (12.5%)

dents made comments as they read their work to their peers, they provided explanations to their listeners and identified varied kinds of problems with their writing. When writers identified problems, listeners gave advice or suggestions only 12.5% of the time (4 out of 32 opportunities). Also interesting is the fact that 75% (24 out of 32) of the writer-identified problems were in the form of questions to their peers and functioned as direct requests for help. Listeners ignored direct requests 83% of the time.

Conclusions

Multiple Meanings for the Label "Peer Response"

The label "peer response group" subsumed quite varied kinds of activities in the two classrooms in this study. The differences in the ways groups fit into Glass's and Peterson's overall curriculum and their different goals for their students led them to frame group activities in very different ways. Glass's focus on helping students become independent of her led her to concentrate on whole-class activities and to depend on groups in which students were to respond to one another's drafts as a transition to that independence. In her class, normally, a student read a paper; there was silence while peers completed the evaluation sheets; the next student read, and so on. Although the audiotapes were patchworks of reading—silence—comments—reading, the pattern was not rigid. Students interrupted themselves and each

other. The drafts being read were often two or three pages long, the "evaluation sheets" involved several questions, and there was not a lot of time left over for students to stray from the sheets' orientation. Students occasionally veered off task and talked about such topics as the weekend's plans. On the whole, however, students were on-task, and on the surface at least, the demands of the response sheet were met.

On the other hand, Peterson's focus on helping students achieve more than they could alone led to his focus on individualized work with students in conferences, with groups providing peripheral support for particular problem-solving activities related to students' writing but rarely actually focused on drafts. In his class the students did not read lengthy pieces of their writing aloud, and they generally spent less time in their groups. The pace was fast, and students collaborated around accomplishing a limited task that was meant to be tangentially related to the possibility of improving a writer's paper. The groups worked this way in part because of how the response sheets oriented peer-listeners to writers (writers were primarily resources, and were not asked to take peer criticism as a principle source of guidance for their own reworkings). Also, almost all peer group sessions in Peterson's classroom presented students with this kind of problem-solving assignment, with collaborative thought and writing playing a powerful role in the overall design of his curriculum.

Groups in these two classrooms illustrate a remarkable complex of different activities and types of interactions that can be included under the term response groups. Likewise, the literature on response groups also often focuses on highly varied activities and interactions under the common label of peer response. For example, Gere and Stevens (1985) and Gere and Abbott (1985) examined the internal activity of peer response groups (across fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades). The teachers in their studies were trained to follow Elbow's (1973) model for peer response. In this model the writer reads his or her piece twice, without commenting on or apologizing for the selection read; listeners, who have no copy of the manuscript, do not write during the first reading, but after it they record their strongest impressions. During the second reading, listeners make detailed notes; afterwards, listeners, in turn, comment about their impressions but not about their evaluations, while the writer remains silent except to ask for clarification. The group time is divided equally among the different members. Such constraints undoubtedly make a difference in the internal workings of the groups, possibly decreasing the need to resist evaluation and to talk purely to "get the work done" but also perhaps restricting spontaneous conversations and interactive talk. By contrast, Nystrand (1986) and Nystrand

and Brandt (1989) examined college freshmen in "studio" versus "non-studio" classrooms. The groups they studied in the "studio" classrooms were at the core of the instructional program, with students taking almost all of the responsibility for helping one another with their writing. Such a format undoubtedly influences group dynamics as well. The point is that the label "peer response" is subject to a great deal of variety, much more than the literature admits, and researchers need to be very careful and specific in attempting to discuss or make generalizations about response groups. Also, peer groups can only be fully understood when they are situated in their larger instructional context.

Learning to Write by Creating Rules

Inside the groups in both classrooms in this study, spontaneous talk about format and mechanics revealed something interesting about how students seemed to acquire these aspects of the written code. They made up and rigidly overapplied rules in ways reminiscent of Rose's (1980, 1984) descriptions of blocked writers and Shaughnessy's (1977), Bartholomae's (1980), and Perl's (1979) of basic writers. The behavior of these academically successful students suggests that writers may overapply rules rigidly as part of a normal learning process, en route to mastering the fuller and more flexible conditions under which the rules are generally used. This finding is not surprising when placed in the larger context of language acquisition. As children learn to talk, they acquire grammatical forms such as the past tense by first overgeneralizing to include the exceptions to rules and so overapplying the rules—e.g., "goed" for "went" (see Clark & Clark, 1977). Similarly, when adults try to change nonstandard speech patterns to match standard forms, they hypercorrect or overapply the new rules they are learning (Labov, 1972). Future studies of writing development could yield new understandings as researchers examine the conditions under which writers overapply rules and how such rule application figures in the acquisition process.

Problematic Kinds of Peer Talk

Inside their groups students in this study displayed a number of common response activities, especially in connection with dittoed response sheets. In these two quite different classrooms, although the groups contained much productive on-task talk, of the 60% of the talk that surrounded the dittoed response sheets, it more often involved some kind of resistance to them (about 40%) than adherence to their directions (about 20%). Resistance to the sheets first occurred when students felt

they were being asked to express negative evaluations of one another's writing, that is, to tell a fellow student about a writing problem. It next surfaced in the strategies students employed to answer questions on the sheets about one another's writing. Besides this resistance to the response sheets, Glass's students evidenced a third difficulty; when writers spontaneously requested help, their peer readers often ignored their requests.

Avoiding Discussions of Problems

Students avoided evaluating one another's writing negatively, and the amount of their avoidance was directly related to the amount of evaluating the sheets asked of them. Glass's sheets focused more on evaluation than Peterson's; thus, her students resisted evaluation more than his, there being more evaluation to be avoided. Peterson was aware that his students would resist evaluating, even writing in his statement to the researchers:

As student response groups normally involve three to five juvenile human beings, it should be clear that setting up groups that work demands a variety of psychological understandings. . . . [S]tudents have great difficulty saying anything negative about each other's work. . . . They need to share without compulsory evaluation.

Peterson did not think he had asked his students to evaluate one another, but they still interpreted some questions on his sheets as evaluative, and they resisted, as he predicted. The persistent avoidance behaviors of Peterson's and Glass's students around discussing a peer's writing problems indicate that it may not be productive at this level for teachers to ask students to locate and discuss problems in one another's writing. It is certainly problematic if teachers depend on peer critiques as being central to their instructional program.

Using Strategies to Complete Sheets

Glass's and Peterson's students' second form of resistance to the dittoed sheets proved even more pervasive; peer-listeners and writers joined forces to get the sheets completed, with peer-listeners involving writers in helping them fill out the sheets and with writers often persuading listeners to make only positive remarks about their writing. This peer negotiation was independent of the directions on the sheets and seemed related to larger issues of classroom and school culture. These students joined together to get the teacher-given tasks done in ways that worked within their peer culture; in this respect they at least partially subverted the teacher-given task. Research is needed on how teachers can set up classrooms and groups within them so that stu-

dents do not feel the need to subvert the tasks the teachers give. One approach might be to create classrooms in which the teacher and students collaborate to design appropriate group activities, with students sharing the decision-making with their teachers (also see discussion in DiPardo and Freedman, 1988).

Not Answering Requests for Help

When Glass's students, on their own and as part of their self-response, asked for help from their peers, the peers rarely gave it. Just as these ninth-graders resisted the task of evaluation, they seemed unequipped in many instances to provide substantive help to their peers with the creation of text, especially when peers' needs went beyond topics being discussed in class and beyond topics of content. The students' reticence about helping one another, even when that help was solicited, suggests that at this level teachers need to be realistic in their expectations of the kinds and amounts of help peers are able or willing to give one another.

Productive Kinds of Peer Talk

In spite of the difficulties these students had in giving and receiving response, two kinds of productive talk permeated these response groups—talk about content and self-response as writers read their own writing aloud to their peers.

Discussions of Content

Interestingly, students were so attracted to discussions of content that in Glass's class, even when the sheets did not direct students to talk about content but instead asked them to talk about issues of form and organization, her students initiated spontaneous discussions about content (11%). Glass's students encouraged and questioned one another, showed evidence that they felt ownership of their writing, and generated or clarified ideas. In Peterson's class, the sheets did direct students to discuss content, and perhaps for this reason, his students were more likely than Glass's to follow the directives on the sheets (24% as opposed to 18%). The behavior of these students inside their groups suggests that teachers should create response environments that encourage students to talk maximally about the content of their writing and that otherwise support this kind of talk.

Self Response

Glass structured groups in a way that promoted self response since her students routinely read their writing aloud to their peers. In an inter-

view with the research team, Glass explained, "I want kids to *hear* their own writing. Other kids' suggestions can be an added benefit, but I really want them to hear their own work, critically." Glass did not expect any direct evidence in the groups that students would be *hearing* their writing, but her students spontaneously commented aloud as they read (even though she explicitly told them not to) and provided such evidence. The kinds of inner dialogues Glass's students verbalized as they read their writing aloud seems to be another useful and important activity groups can foster.

Implications for Future Research

This study provides one look at what is now the increasingly common classroom practice of using peer response groups to support the teaching and learning of writing. It is limited to two ninth-grade classrooms, with a population of college preparatory students. It examines only the students' oral language, with no account of student writing. By offering a comprehensive and in-depth look at the surrounding context and internal working of response groups in these two classrooms, the study raises a number of questions for future research.

In particular, the very different ways groups were framed in the classrooms in this study and the apparent differences in peer response groups from one study to the next in the research literature suggests the importance of future researchers describing and attempting to account for how these differences affect what actually happens when students talk to one another. In future studies, a number of variables seem important to account for: the age of the students; the kind of training students have for working together in groups, students' past experiences with response groups; the flow of activities surrounding groups and the roles groups play in the complex of response activities within the classroom as a whole; whether the focus of the group activities is relatively open or relatively highly specified; the presence or absence of dittoed directions to guide group talk; the amount of time students spend in groups; whether students respond to one another predominantly orally or in writing; whether or not students read their drafts aloud or whether they work with drafts at all; the amount and kind of teacher presence in the groups; and the role of the listener (particularly how evaluative that role is). In the end, the activity surrounding and within response groups will need to be connected to student writing, something this study could not do because student writing was available from only four focal students in each class, and these writings did not include complete sets of drafts.

The common patterns that emerged across the very different re-sponse group settings in this study also need to be explored further. Will students generally avoid negative evaluation or are there some conditions under which students productively evaluate one another in this way? Are there kinds of classroom settings or alternative kinds of group configurations in which students do not spend so much energy negotiating and maintaining their solidarity while getting their work done? Or is solidarity of this kind integral to peer communities in school settings? How can productive talk about content best be stimulated? Under what conditions might students be able to talk productively about topics beyond the content of their writing? Under what conditions might students be able to respond helpfully to the questions writers raise about their own writing? This study shows how much we still have to learn if teachers are to provide classroom environments that are maximally supportive of peers talking and learning together. The study also suggests that classroom teachers might contribute a great deal to our knowledge by examining how they organize peer talk from the outside and then by exploring the talk that takes place among peers inside their classrooms—looking critically and carefully at the dynamic interplay between talk about writing and learning to write.

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Announcement and Call for Proposals
1992 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

Donald McCloskey, Anne Ruggles Gere, Steven Mailloux, Jeanne Fahnestock, Richard Larson, Carolyn Miller, Christine Neuwirth, Gary Schumacher, and Bill Smith will be among the featured speakers at the 11th annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, July 8–11, 1992 in State College, Pennsylvania.

We invite scholars, researchers, and teachers of rhetoric and writing to participate in the conference by presenting papers or workshops on any relevant topic—rhetorical history or theory, the composing process, basic writing, writing in academic and non-academic contexts, advanced composition, the rhetoric of science, writing across the curriculum, rhetorical criticism, writing pedagogy, computers and writing, technical and business writing, and so on. One-page proposals will be accepted through APRIL 6, 1992.

To submit a proposal, to volunteer to chair a session, or to find out more about attending the conference, contact Davida Charney, Department of English, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802. (BITNET: IRJ at PSUVM)