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ABSTRACT
         A study examined peer response groups in two ninth
grade English classes. The study specifically investigated research
considerations including: (1) the teachers' use of response groups;
(2) the kinds of response the students give themselves in response
groups; and (3) the connection between student response and the
teachers' directions to the groups. Subjects, 60 students in two
schools in the San Francisco area, were observed for 17 weeks. Data
collection consisted of daily videotaping and audiotaping of whole
class discussions and of peer response groups, ethnographic note
taking, and collection of all writing materials prepared by teachers
and students. Results indicated that peer response groups can help
students respond to their own work. When talk about content was
initiated, members of the groups encouraged and questioned one
another and demonstrated ownership of their writing. However, the
students avoided talk that involved evaluation of another student's
writing and never played the role of teacher. The students rarely
discussed real writing problems and resisted the teacher-directed
response on dittoed response sheets. Findings suggest that groups
will work differently in different classrooms and with different ages
and types of students. In one classroom, peers responded to one
another's writing in order to develop evaluative skills, while in the
other classroom, the response group functions so that students can
collaborate around the discovery of one element of the writing craft,
which is then discussed in whole class discussions. (Tables of data
are included, and notes and references are attached.) (NKA)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

PEER RESPONSE GROUPS IN TWO NINTH-GRADE CLASSROOMS[1]

by

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INTRODUCTION

When students write in school, their teachers often have them work together in "peer response groups." The groups commonly meet during class time, the activity occurs at varied points in the students' writing processes, and the occasions provide student writers with a regular time and place for sharing their writing with one another. In response groups, teachers usually expect their students to help one another with their writing, to provide feedback, to work collaboratively.

A number of books about teaching writing discuss the benefits of peer response groups but give sometimes conflicting advice to teachers about optimal ways to organize them (e.g., compare Moffett [1968] and Moffett and Wagner [1978], who suggest that student-readers coach student-writers, with Elbow [1973, 1981] and Peri and Wilson [1986], who emphasize the importance of the writer's maintaining control of and guiding peer response. See Gere [1987] for a complete catalogue of the work on peer response groups in the writing classroom). Regardless of the way groups are organized, they fit well with newer ideas about writing instruction. Response groups theoretically can provide a convenient structure for helping students in a class develop a sense of audience and write to broader audiences than the "teacher-examiner" (Britton, et al., 1975; Elbow, 1973, 1981; Healy, 1980). They can support an expanded writing process in which students have opportunities to think about their topics as well as to revise their work (e.g., Britton et al., 1975; Flower & Hayes, 1979; Freedman, 1985a, 1985b, in press). In particular, response groups can assist teachers, who are overburdened with the paper load, in providing response during the writing process.

Support for the use of peer response groups can be seen in Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) theories of the importance of social interaction for language learning. In classrooms, small groups can intensify students' social interactions around the topic of written language and potentially can help them increase their skills as writers. Bruffee (1984), an enthusiastic proponent of peers learning from one another, cites both Kuhn and Rorty in arguing that knowledge is not a static given but "socially justified," evolving as communities of "knowledgeable peers" interact, thus shaping, extending, and reinforcing one another's ideas (p. 6). Bruffee (1978) argues that it is this sort of self-governed dynamic which we must allow our students, if they are to discover "the social and emotional foundation upon which intellectual work rests" (p.462).

As an example of learning based in a community of "knowledgeable peers," Bruffee cites M.L.J. Abercrombie's *The Anatomy of Judgement* (1960), a study which documents how peer influence works through a process of group discussion to develop the diagnostic judgment of medical students at the University of London. Bruffee (1973) has argued that while such peer collaboration is indeed the norm in the professions and in business, it has traditionally been absent from the classroom--a gap which becomes even more note-worthy considering the potent influence of peer dynamics throughout one's school years.

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In a national survey of 560 successful teachers of writing and 715 of their secondary students, Freedman (1985b, in press) found that many otherwise successful teachers were dissatisfied with peer response groups. These teachers said that they experienced difficulty in keeping the groups on task, not to mention in getting students to respond effectively to one another's writing. The teachers also found it hard to correct problems with groups since they could not easily keep track of what their students were doing in groups. Finally, the secondary students reported even more dissatisfaction with response groups than did their teachers. The students complained that sharing their writing was uncomfortable and a waste of time; they felt that their peers rarely offered them substantial help with their writing.

Studies of Peer Response Groups

There has been remarkably little research on how peer response groups actually function in the classroom. The little research that is available presents conflicting findings (e.g., see Gere & Abbott [1985], Gere & Stevens [1985], and Nystrand [1986] for discussions of the positive effects of peer response groups as compared with Berkenkotter [1984], Newkirk [1984], and Hillocks [1981, 1984, 1986] for negative effects). Gere and her colleagues indicate that students in peer groups (across grade levels) respond to the substance of the writing while teachers who write comments respond to form and mechanics; however, Gere offers little information about what makes the groups she studied successful. Nystrand notes that providing group participants copies of each essay to be discussed is helpful for college students, but offers few other clues as to why the groups he studied are successful. Meanwhile, Newkirk and Berkenkotter, with case studies of college students, demonstrate that peer influence can as easily subvert as support educational goals. Hillocks argues that narrowly focused problem-solving groups are more effective than broadly directed response groups.

The actual use of response groups in the writing classroom is clearly a complex endeavor. We know little about the conditions that allow response groups to accomplish what theory says they can. We need to understand the obstacles to the success of groups, how they might be overcome, and under what conditions. To begin to understand the potential of peer response, we need to gain a better understanding of response group dynamics. In this article, I present a detailed study of peer response groups in two contrasting but generally successful ninth-grade classrooms. The study offers a methodology for connecting groups to their larger social context and for analyzing student interactions within peer groups. Through the analysis of the student interactions, it uncovers the kinds of response students give freely and the kinds they resist giving. Finally, it reveals how the teacher, as direction-giver and classroom leader, puts into motion a number of interactional patterns that group members play out.

THE STUDY

Overview

The research consists of a naturalistic study of response groups in two ninth-grade college preparatory English classes. One class was observed for ten weeks and the other for seven weeks; in each class a sequence of three writing assignments was completed. All small group meetings were audiotaped. This taping was part of a larger ethnographic study of response in the two classrooms which was coupled with a national survey of successful teachers of writing (Freedman, 1985b, in press).

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During the period of observation, five sessions of response groups occurred in one class and four in the other; each session consisted of approximately seven to eight individual group meetings. Throughout this article, I use the term *session* to refer to each time groups meet. Within each session, a number of small groups meet simultaneously; I use the term *meeting* for an individual group meeting within a session. Generally groups assemble only once during a single class period; however, there are times when students gather together more than once during a class period. Some 60 response group meetings make up the data for this study.

Four questions are asked about these response groups:

1. Given the different group functions in these classrooms, how frequently do response groups occur as compared to other kinds of groups?

2. How do these teachers' uses of response groups relate to their more global plans for teaching writing?

3. In response groups in Ms. Glass's class, what kinds of response do the students give themselves?

4. In response groups in the two classrooms, what kinds of response do the students give one another, and what is the connection between student response and the teachers' directions to the groups (including dittoed direction sheets and oral instructions)?

This study makes no attempt to connect changes in student writing to group work. This choice was made because the instructional context in the two classrooms studied here is rich with response of a number of types; the whole complex undoubtedly influences how students approach their writing. Thus, it is impossible to determine in this kind of descriptive work how one kind of response, singled out, relates to changes in student writing. In fact, in one of the two classrooms studied here, it was not the teacher's goal with response groups to have students help one another improve particular in-progress drafts. It would certainly be desirable to know how writing is affected by group interactions; however, the design of this project precludes such knowledge. Some suggestions about the influence of groups on student writing are made in case studies presented in Freedman (in press); these suggestions are made when groups and student writing are placed in the larger instructional context and when the work of a particular student is followed across time in all contexts.

The Participants

One of the classes was taught by Mary Lee Glass at Gunn High School in Palo Alto, California. The other class was taught by Art Peterson at Lowell High School in San Francisco. Ms. Glass and Mr. Peterson have reputations as highly successful teachers of writing in schools with outstanding reputations. Both are active professionally and are published writers. Both work to implement current thinking about teaching writing in their classrooms, including current thinking on peer groups.

The students in both classrooms were college bound. Gunn students come from a fairly homogeneous middle- and upper middle-class community. Most are the children of Stanford faculty or of executives in Silicon Valley with a smaller group coming from an

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upwardly mobile, blue-collar, ethnically mixed neighborhood. Ms. Glass's class contained 33 students, 12 boys and 21 girls. Of these, 26 were Caucasian and 7 were Asian-American. All the Asians were of Chinese heritage except for one of east Indian descent.

Since Lowell is the academic high school for the San Francisco Unified School District with a competitive admissions policy and since it draws from the entire city, the Lowell students represent the variety of ethnic groups that make up San Francisco. However, most who are admitted to Lowell are Asians, followed by Caucasians and then a sizable minority of Hispanics and Blacks. The students come from the wealthiest to the poorest of San Francisco families. Most Lowell students are female. In Mr. Peterson's class of 27 students, 14 were Asian, 1 was Black, 3 were Spanish surnamed, and 9 were Caucasian. The great majority--21 out of 27--were female.

The Classes

The title for Ms. Glass's ninth-grade honors class was "Communication," including writing and speaking. Mr. Peterson's was a regular ninth-grade English class with curriculum centering around literature and writing. Both classes were one semester in length and were observed in the Spring.

Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures

During 17 weeks of observation (ten weeks at Gunn and seven weeks at Lowell), video- and audio-tape recordings of whole-class discussions were collected daily while an ethnographer took field notes. Detail about the ethnographic note taking and video recording conventions and procedures can be found in Freedman (1985b, in press). All materials prepared by the teachers were collected as was all writing by the students, including many drafts completed out of class. All peer group meetings were audiotaped. These data were supplemented by interviews with the students and teachers and notes of casual conversations between the participants and the researchers. The tape recordings, field notes, student writing, teacher materials, and interviews provide a comprehensive record of school-based response to the students' writing. The entire data set forms a backdrop to the subset of group tapes that are concerned with peer response to writing and that are the primary subject of analysis here.

To record the peer group meetings, a member of the research team gave each group a small audio recorder. The recorder was already turned on for the students at the beginning of the group session, but they were asked to turn over the tape if it ran out before the end of the session. Students returned tapes and recorders when the groups ended and students returned to whole-class activity or when class ended.

In spite of the substantial background noise generated when groups are meeting, students are generally audible on the tapes. They followed directions for recording themselves for the most part. On two or three occasions a group member turned off the tape in the middle of the group meeting. For the first few sessions, when the students were not yet used to having the tape recorders present in their groups, they often tended to play with the equipment. They would sometimes talk directly to the researchers on the tapes. But after several sessions and toward the end of longer sessions, most groups seemed to forget about the presence of the tapes.

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Analysis Procedures

Group Functions

The first step in the analysis involved identifying those group sessions which served the function of responding to writing. I first determined how the teacher intended the groups to function by analyzing the data from two points of view: (a) the researchers' and (b) the teachers'. To get the researchers' point of view, my research assistant, Jane Bennett, and I independently inferred the teachers' intent from the teachers' talk to the students. Of particular importance were the directions the teachers gave the students about what they were to do in the group meetings. Each of us reviewed field notes and then audio and videotapes of the teachers' directions to the students when the groups initially were organized. Next, using the teachers' directions as a guide, the two of us together decided on preliminary function labels for the group sessions. Then we independently classified the function of each session of groups and refined operational definitions of the labels.

The categories were finalized by having Ms. Glass and Mr. Peterson look at the same data that we had looked at and explain how they intended each session of groups to function in their classroom. The teachers were given descriptions of their group sessions and were asked to match these descriptions to the researchers' function categories when possible. The descriptions of the group sessions were provided to jog the teachers' memories; a year's time elapsed between the data collection and these teachers' explanations of group functions. The descriptions were chronologically-ordered and included the activities for each peer group session across the semester of observation. A separate list of the researchers' function labels and a brief description for each label was also provided. The teachers were free to reject or reformulate the category labels if they found them inappropriate. The descriptions of the sessions were at a greater level of specificity than the labels' generalizations; lexical overlap between labels and descriptions was avoided to keep from giving the teachers information about the researchers' categorization of group sessions. For example, the researchers described a peer-group session in Ms. Glass's classroom whose function was assigned *responding to writing:*

> 07-3:[2] Students talk in groups about problems they're encountering at the beginning of work on their saturation report project. They also discuss their focus sentences for the project each is involved with.

Contexts for Response Group Work

Once *responding to writing* groups were identified, I compared them across the two classrooms, to understand the similarities and differences in how response groups are used in different settings. We looked both at the broad context in which they occurred and at the activities and talk surrounding a sample group in each classroom. The audiotapes and the field notes and audio- and videotape recordings of the classroom activities surrounding the response group sessions were reviewed. This comparison of the contexts for response groups led both to an understanding of the contexts for the groups and a broadening of the meaning of the label *responding to writing.*

Response Groups' Internal Dynamics: Patterns and Hypotheses about Self-Response and Student-Response

The next step in the analysis required a close examination of the talk across a number of *responding to writing* groups in each classroom. This part of the analysis involved

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several phases. Following Corsaro (1985), in the first, more global, phase I aimed to identify preliminary patterns within the group talk and pose hypotheses about those patterns. First, tape recordings of all responding to writing groups were reviewed, and detailed notes were made. Those notes, along with the accompanying audio recordings, were used to identify consistent patterns and working hypotheses about peer interactions within response groups. To identify the patterns in the data, my research assistant and I first worked independently and then compared and synchronized our descriptions.

The second phase involved a more detailed examination of the group talk to verify patterns and elaborate hypotheses. Based on the patterns that emerged during the first phase, we made partial transcriptions of some tapes and complete transcriptions of others. We transcribed the tapes from which we derived our hypotheses, the transcriptions allowing for elaboration of the hypotheses. In this way, again working first independently and then collaboratively, we created a stabilized set of patterns. We moved from analyzing single sessions to analyzing multiple sessions. We then transcribed tapes that could suggest counterexamples. We attempted 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 interactional discourse patterns that characterize response to student writing in the response groups in these two classrooms. As a result of these analyses, I focus attention on student self-response within the groups and on the response students give one another.

RESULTS

Group Functions

Function Categories

The researchers' inferences about the teachers' intended functions for groups led to the identification of four categories for describing peer group functions:

1. *Responding to writing.* Students have composed something outside class and bring it to a group session for the purpose of receiving feedback--presumably (and sometimes, this is made explicit in the teacher's instructions) to take the feedback into account during subsequent stages of the writing process. Feedback can occur on: (a) a draft (or a section of a paper in progress) or (b) material not intended as part of a final paper, but intended more to serve as a practice exercise (e.g., paragraphs, focus sentences). The nature of the feedback may be structured by the teacher's 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.

2. *Editing writing.* Students have completed an assignment, and help one another with proofreading their final versions for errors of syntax, punctuation, spelling and so on. Again, proofreading exercises can be accompanied by both written and oral guidelines from the teacher.

3. *Composing collaboratively.* Students work together in groups to create a single piece of writing (e.g., a paragraph, a script for a one-minute commercial).

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4. *Thinking collaboratively.* Students work in groups to think about an issue in a way that might model the kind of thinking needed to generate ideas and solve problems faced during composing. Sometimes the end-product of this work is an oral presentation which is fed into whole-class discussion.

The two teachers agreed with the researchers that these category labels provided accurate descriptors for their intended functions for the group work. Both were able to label every group according to one of these categories, and neither suggested any new labels. In all cases, it is possible for a group to have more than one function; however, one function will be dominant, with other functions subordinate to the main function. When teachers and researchers were coding, they considered these categories as dominant functions. Considered in this way, these four categories are mutually exclusive and comprehensive for the group data.

Distribution of Group Functions

The two researchers agreed with one another 100% on assignment of groups to categories. Table 1 shows the number of groups in each class assigned to each category from the researchers' and teachers' points of view.

Table 1. Assignment of Groups to Function Categories

Group Function	Glass's Class (N=17)			Peterson's Class (N=16)		
	Res.	Glass	%Agr.	Res.	Peters.	%Agr.
Responding to writing	7	5	71	4	4	100
Editing writing	2	2	100	0	0	100
Composing collaboratively	7	2	29	4	5	80
Thinking collaboratively	1	8	13	8	7	88
AVERAGE AGR.			53			92

Note: The N stands for the number of group sessions being labeled. Res. stands for the researchers. The Res. column indicates the number of sessions given a particular label by the researchers; the column for the teacher indicates the number given that same label by the teacher. The final column under each classroom (Agr.) indicates the percentage of agreement about a given label between the teacher and the researcher.

With one minor exception, Mr. Peterson agreed with the researchers on their assignments of groups to categories (one of the groups that he labeled *composing*

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collaboratively, the researchers labeled *thinking collaboratively*). The picture proves more complex for Ms. Glass's class. When the researchers labeled the functions of the peer group sessions in Ms. Glass's classroom, they labeled all groups in which students talk about their in-progress writing as *responding to writing*. These groups include those in which students meet to give one another feedback on the specifics of one another's "focus sentences" or "thesis statements," those in which students offer troubleshooting advice about writers' difficulties with a particular assignment, and those in which peers read their work aloud to one another and fill out evaluation sheets in response to what they hear. When Ms. Glass herself labeled the sessions independently, she gave *only* the peer group meetings in which students worked with paper drafts and evaluation sheets the status of *responding to writing*. The other two groups, which the researchers labeled *responding to writing*, she labeled *thinking collaboratively*. She also labeled five groups in which students work together to create an oral presentation of a commercial *thinking collaboratively* because no text is produced to be handed in. The researchers labeled these groups *composing collaboratively* because the activities involve producing a group composition, albeit an oral one. Although Ms. Glass and the researchers disagreed about the labeling of these two categories, the differences seem to be due more to insufficient specification of the definitions for the categories than to real differences in ideas about the nature of the activities.

All peer group functions are present in both classrooms (with the exception of the editing function for Mr. Peterson's). Thus, in the classrooms of these teachers, group work functions in a number of ways simultaneously. However, there are differences between the two classrooms. Mr. Peterson's groups function more frequently for *thinking collaboratively* than for responding; considering groups about which the researchers and teacher agree, Ms. Glass uses *responding* more than other functions. Across the different writing assignments, Ms. Glass and the researchers agreed that she uses *composing collaboratively* two times; both of these times occur during one assignment--the design and performance of a commercial script. Mr. Peterson's use of *composing collaboratively* occurs throughout the period of observation.

In the end, there were clearly five sessions of *responding to writing* groups in Ms. Glass's class and four in Mr. Peterson's, making approximately 60 response groups during the observation.

Contexts for Response Group Work

A full explication of the contexts of these two classrooms can be found in Freedman (1985b, in press). Of particular note for a study of response groups is the fact that Ms. Glass places much of the responsibility for in-process response on student writers working in peer response groups. She emphasizes the importance of writers developing skills of independent evaluation. Peer response sessions are for students to think about revision and learn to evaluate and criticize constructively. For Ms. Glass, peer response groups are central to her curriculum and fit well with her guiding philosophy of teaching writing.

On the other hand, Mr. Peterson works personally with his students as they write. He writes comments on their drafts and sets up regular conferences with individual student writers. He works with individual students to show them how to achieve more than they could on their own. Peer response groups are not an important source of advice to student writers about their drafts. Mr. Peterson uses groups mainly to teach

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writers to think collaboratively and response to writing is not usually part of these groups. On those occasions when student writing becomes the subject of the problem-solving, the groups are labeled *responding to writing* groups. In these thinking/response groups, students practice a skill such as moving between specifics and appropriate generalization using the writing of the group members as their data. As they pool information about a given piece of writing, they may remind one another of material potentially useful to the writer and they may give their opinions. The response groups do not emphasize peer evaluation and do not explicitly aim to help writers revise. For Mr. Peterson, then, groups are central to his teaching, but response groups are peripheral.

The different orientations of these two teachers predict different uses of response groups in the two classrooms. To compare how response groups function in these two classrooms, I analyze ways the teachers direct the groups and interact with them, the roles played by the students within the groups, and ways the teacher organizes group work in relation to class work. For this analysis, I arbitrarily selected the first group session in the observation period in each classroom which both the researchers and the teacher agreed functioned as *responding to writing*.

Ms. Glass

Session **03-1** is the first *responding to writing* group in Ms. Glass's classroom. For this session, students meet in self-selected groups for 34 minutes of class-time (lessons are usually 45 minutes long). During the previous two weeks, each student had gathered data about another student in the class in preparation for an "interview" paper, the first major assignment of the semester which is prepared first as a speech to the class and then as a written piece. By the time session **03-1** takes place, students have put their interview material for their paper into a rough draft. Before the session begins, Ms. Glass hands each student the dittoed sheet in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Dittoed Response Sheet: Ms. Glass

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:

Ms. Glass sets up the group session with the following instructions to students:

If you're the writer of the paper, do just one thing. 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.... As a

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listener, your job is harder, partly because we aren't used to listening carefully and with concentration. After the paper has been read, fill out the editing sheet and think about how you as an audience might help the writer to make it a better paper.... don't get someone else to read your paper for you... and if you want to make verbal comments about what you hear that's okay too.

Except for the occasional interruption into the group's work to clarify points on the editing sheets and to answer occasional questions raised by individual students, Ms. Glass does not participate in peer-group activity. She walks around the room to show that she is available if her students want to request her advice. They sometimes ask her questions which she sometimes answers directly but which she more often throws back to the students. She tries to get them to find their own answers.

In the groups the students take turns reading their papers. At the end of the session students collect the editing sheets peers have completed about their drafts. At this point, Ms. Glass herself collects nothing, reminding students that their final drafts are due in a couple of days' time.

The key elements of this "response" group activity seem to be a relatively large proportion of class time devoted to peer-together work; a focus on the evaluative role of the listener (the writer, too, in the reading aloud, becomes a listener, a critic); the presence of detailed dittoed directions for the response, with a focus on written rather than oral commentary; an assumption that the dittoed sheets will offer writers useful feedback towards revising and reshaping their drafts; and the presence of special technical vocabulary: "showing," "the focus," "the introduction."

Mr. Peterson

In Mr. Peterson's class, the first group session labeled *responding to writing* (01-5) occurs at the end of the first week of the observation period (the middle of the semester for the students). Students meet in their usual groups for 12 minutes out of a 45-minute class period. (Mr. Peterson assigns students to small groups at the start of the semester, and for the most part the members are constant for all types of groups across the entire semester.) The past week's activity encompassed a range of tasks: students talked, both in groups and out of them, about details to be observed of a Cary Grant character in a cup from the opening of *North by Northwest,* about details of the appearance and personality of a *Great Expectations* (GE) character, 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 Mr. Peterson instructed stude. to write a paragraph about a character in *GE*, using details available from the novel. One of the semester's major projects is a long paper about a *GE* character. The writing exercise on Cary Grant that forms the basis for this response group session is this paragraph that is preparatory to the longer paper. Before students arrange themselves into groups, Mr. Peterson writes two sentences on the board:

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

Mr. Peterson says that these are possible topic sentences for a paragraph about a character and asks students to consider the difference in how the two would function as topic sentences. He then uses students' responses (e.g., "The second one goes further than the first." "It tells about the effect.") as a springboard for directing group "response" work:

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When you get into your groups today, I want you to look at the topic sentences that begin each paragraph and look at what kind of sentence it is. 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. So look for topic sentences; see if they're working.

Students work together for about ten minutes while Mr. Peterson moves from one group to the next, contributing to peer comments. As the class time draws to a close, Mr. Peterson brings groups back into whole-class discussion, asking for examples of "strong topic sentences" that students have heard from one another's paragraphs. As the lesson ends, he comments (rather negatively) on the lack of response students seem to have been giving one another, and collects their paragraphs, not to grade them, but "to see how you're getting on."

Key elements of this peer group session are the relative brevity of the peer-together activity; the close relationship between group work and whole-class discussion; an emphasis on oral response which "picks out" a paragraph's topic sentence and evaluates it with respect to a model, a specific and finite task; Mr. Peterson's active presence as an evaluator of a writer's progress; and the presence of concepts dealing with connection: the "strong" topic sentence is the one "which goes a bit further," which hints, that is, at the direction of a piece of writing.

Comparisons

These two descriptions of the context for a peer response session in each classroom demonstrate differences in the nature and focus of the teacher's expectations for group activity. Logistical differences, such as the time devoted to peer group work and the teacher's collecting or not collecting students' writing, are clear. Even clearer are the differences in the roles the students in each classroom are asked to take as responders and how students are directed to work in relation to each other's writing and their own. Ms. Glass emphasizes the significance of evaluative, critical listening; Mr. Peterson focuses students' attention on one aspect of a craft. For Ms. Glass, peer response is written, not just oral; for Mr. Peterson, peer response is oral commentary. In Ms. Glass's class, students are becoming (self-) critics; in Mr. Peterson's, they are working to solve specific problems. Even the vocabulary the teacher and students use to talk about writing is classroom-specific.

Although the students are *responding to writing* in both classrooms, the actual function of this function category plays itself out differently in the two classes. In Ms. Glass's class, peers respond to one another's writing in order to develop evaluative skills; in Mr. Peterson's class, the response group functions so that students can collaborate around the discovery of one element of the craft of writing, an element to be returned into whole-class discussion.

Response Groups' Internal Dynamics

Study of the student talk during group meetings shows that students are on-task almost all the time, that is they are engaged in some kind of response to writing. The next two sections give detail about the response that occurred within these response groups.

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Self-Response

Because Mr. Peterson does not focus on self-response or set up groups so that students would respond to themselves, self-response occurs mainly in the groups in Ms. Glass's classroom. This kind of response occurs mainly when Ms. Glass's students read their work aloud. Ms. Glass says that she sets up response groups so that students will become better self-responders. In an interview with the research team, she explains, "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." Ms. Glass does not expect to see direct evidence in the groups that students are *hearing* their writing; however, the tapes contain such evidence. When Ms. Glass's students read their work aloud to each other, they interrupt their reading to comment on their writing. Ms. Glass does not direct th m to interrupt themselves; they do so spontaneously. When listening to their talk, one can hear these students literally sense the presence of their audience.

A set of categories for self-response was developed based on instances of self-response in the groups meeting during one session (08-2). Their validity was checked in two other randomly selected sessions. Students' oral self-evaluation while reading their writing, then, was classified into four types:

1. *Explanation for the listener.* The writer interrupts him or herself during reading to explain something about the content or the format of the piece about to be read. What the writer says never entails 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 grp 7)**

2. *Identification of problem: Clarity.* The writer identifies a problem with clarity in his or her draft while reading aloud, sometimes by a question about the lucidity of what listeners have just heard and sometimes by a statement that the writing is 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 grp 6)**

3. *Identification of problem: Specifics of form.* The writer identifies 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) lies in the degree of specificity with which the writer labels the problem. As with problems of clarity, the writer's identifications can be either a direct question to the peer-listeners or an assertion of difficulty.

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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 grp 6)

4. *Identification of problem: Content-focused wording or detail.* The writer identifies a problem in the draft which relates more to the content of the writing than to its form, i.e. problems of word choice which lead to an unintended interpretation of the writer's ideas or problems with the appropriateness of particular details. The writer almost always uses 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 grp 5)

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

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

<u>Table 2. Student Self-Response</u>:
<u>Listening to Oneself in Ms. Glass's Class</u>

Types	Number of Occurrences Across Six Groups	Number Leading to Peer Feedback
A. Explanation for the listener	21	n/a
B. Identification of problem: clarity	11	2 (18%)
C. Identification of problem: specifics of form	14	2 (14%)
D. Identification of problem: content-focused wording or detail	7	0

If, during an instance of self-response, the writer identifies a problem and asks for help, Table 2 shows the number of times listeners actually give the writer help.

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The analysis shows that when students verbalize self-response as they read their work to their peers, they most often provide explanations to their listeners; they less often identify problems. When writers do identify problems, listeners give advice or suggestions only 12.5% of the time (4 out of 32 opportunities). Seventy-five percent (24 out of 32) of the writer-identified problems are in the form of questions to their peers and function as direct requests for help. Listeners ignore direct requests 83% of the time. Ms. Glass's students accomplish what she expects in that they are responding to themselves; however, peer response (her explicit agenda and the agenda of the students) is not accomplished at this point in the response group.

Student Response

The response students give one another seems to be conditioned by the ways the teachers set up the groups, whether or not they direct students to complete written forms (editing sheets, response sheets) and when response is oral only, whether or not students have to report back to the whole class.

Ms. Glass always has members of response groups complete what she calls "evaluation sheets." These are dittoed sheets that must be completed in writing by each listener for each writer. During two of Mr. Peterson's four sessions of response groups, his students also work with dittoed sheets. In completing these sheets, students are explicitly directed to give one another a kind of response. In the response groups in Mr. Peterson's class, when there are no sheets and when students do not have to report back to the whole class, students are off-task almost 50% of the time. The sheets or some kind of reporting from the groups seems to keep these ninth grade students on task.

WHEN WRITTEN FORMS ARE INVOLVED

What do the sheets ask of the students? Ms. Glass's sheets vary little from one assignment to the next (see the copy of the sheet for session 03-1 in Figure 1, Page 9). The sheets directly ask students to say what they think about the quality of one another's writing.

In Mr. Peterson's class, the sheets are less explicitly aimed at getting students to help one another revise (see Figure 2, next page). Rather students are to pool information about a given piece of writing. In the process, they may remind one another of material potentially useful to the writer and they give their opinions by noting if they find something "out of place" (question 3, anecdote sheet) or "convincing" (*Great Expectations sheet*). His focus on collaborative thinking is evident.

What kinds of response do the sheets seem to elicit? For Ms. Glass's class, student talk during the meeting of the six groups in session 03-1 indicates that talk stimulated by the evaluation sheet does not involve listener response to writing. Response occurs only 21% of the time. In Mr. Peterson's class, problem-solving occurs in lieu of response.

What do the students do when they are not responding or solving problems related to writing? First, they avoid evaluation. Second, they figure out collaboratively how to complete the sheet in ways that will preserve their relationships with their peers and that will satisfy the teacher.

Figure 2. Dittoed Response Sheets: Mr. Peterson

Character Anecdote

What word, not used in the selection, describes the character trait
the writer portrays with this anecdote?
Which words or sentences most suggest this trait?
What words or sentences seem out of place?
What word does the writer use to describe his subject's character?

Great Expectations Character Sketch

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]

Avoiding Evaluation. In both classes, the sheets ask students to evaluate one
another's writing even though this is not the focus of Mr. Peterson's sheet. In both
classes, students avoid this task. On the first ditto sheet from Mr. Peterson's class in
Figure 1, one question implicitly calls for evaluation: "What words or sentences seem out
of place?" Students refuse to answer it:

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 grp 8)

Mike:	I'm not going to say anything's out of place. Okay?
Donald:	Yeah. Everything's great. Perfect!
[both laugh]	

> (03-5 grp 4)

Ms. Glass's students behave similarly. Her evaluation sheets explicitly request
peer-listeners to note a draft's strengths as well as its weaknesses. Students think they

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must write something negative on the sheet, but they explain to their peers that they are doing this because they think Ms. Glass expects it but that they do not believe what they have written. Jeannie gives Sally her commentary and apologizes:

Jeannie: Sorry, I had to put a "no" in there somewhere.

Writers as well as peer-listeners are on guard against evaluation. Writers tend to defend their drafts against the comments on the evaluation sheets. In the following example, Julie reacts to Cindy's written comment on what Julie said about a person being "half Indian" (one parent was from India).

Julie: Oh, see, the part about the half-Indian, I thought that, that was because, she's creative because of that, but I don't know-
Cindy: I don't know. That doesn't seem....all of a sudden, I heard this...how come that's there?
Julie: I only put it there because I like it.
Cindy: Fine. I'm not going to underline anything.
(03-1 grp 6)

Cindy's "I'm not going to underline anything" refers to the evaluation-sheet's direction to mark a sentence that needs more work. Cindy's final reassurance to Julie is occasioned by Julie's defensiveness about Cindy's comments on her draft; Cindy does not understand the relevance of the "half-Indian part." Julie's draft is a description of a classmate who is Asian-American and Julie claims that this ethnic mixture ("half Indian") makes the classmate especially creative. Cindy does not see how the ethnic mixture relates to the point about the classmate's "creativity."

Likewise, in Mr. Peterson's class the writer Donald helps Mike see just how convincing the evidence he has presented is:

[Donald has just read his paper about Joe Gargery.]
Mike: So you'd say "timid." What's your most specific evidence for that?
Donald: Doesn't talk back to Mrs. Joe.
Mike: Or he'll get beat up.
Donald: That's pretty convincing.
Mike: I'm convinced. I'm convinced that's convincing. I'll put "sort of."
Donald: No. It's convincing!
(06-5 grp 4)

Writers Help Listeners Complete Sheets. Related to avoiding evaluation is the negotiation between writers and listeners to complete the sheets to the satisfaction of both parties. In both classrooms, listeners get the writer to help them complete the sheet. In Ms. Glass's class, Karen asks the writer, Julie, for help:

[Julie reads]
Karen: Can you read your intro, introduction again?
[Julie reads introduction]
Karen: Okay, that's good. Oh, then could you read the focus...?
(08-2 grp 5)

Likewise, in Mr. Peterson's class, Gina tells her group how to complete the sheet on her piece:

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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 "clever"?
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 clever way to identify yourself. Noble and clever, noble and clever. I've said that about forty-five times!
                    (06-5 grp 8)

To conclude, sheets keep students on task. The need for listeners to fill out the sheets and for writers to attend to the listeners' written comments organizes the way students spend their time in groups--that is, they spend much of their time figuring out what they will put on the sheets and filling them out. Substantively, the sheets orient listeners to what they hear being read and thus influence what they attend to. For example, if the sheets ask them to write something about the focus of the piece of writing, they listen for the focus. The evaluation sheets also organize patterns of feedback and response-to-feedback in group talk. Much feedback centers around topics raised on the sheets and what students will and will not write about one another's writing. Throughout, students avoid evaluating one another. They will fill out the sheets and solve problems, but writers, not peer listeners, initiate most of the talk about their own pieces.

Spontaneous Response Not Related to the Sheets

Despite the strong influence of the evaluation sheets over the discourse of peer response groups, there are instances of writer-listener interaction which are not directly prompted by the presence of the sheets. These interactions can be classified into two basic types across the data: those concerning mechanics or format and those concerning content. Mechanical issues include where to put commas, whether to say "was" or "were"; and format includes issues such as whether to double space, where to put one's name, whether there should be a title, and so on. This kind of talk occurs mainly in Ms. Glass's class when students try to help one another avoid negative teacher-evaluation; at this level, some of them are confident enough to offer advice. Content deals with the substance of the writing and discussions about content occur in both classrooms.

Mechanics/Format. In Ms. Glass's class students show concern about questions of format, punctuation, and syntactic correctness. Writers ask for information and listeners offer it unsolicited. The excerpts below are typical.

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.

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Jeannie:	"Were" is better.
Julie:	Yeah, just put a comma right there so we know-
	(08-3 grp 5)

Meryl is reading and Julie interrupts 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 grp 7)

What is most striking about this type of feedback is the way students use "rules" to justify their response. Sometimes, as in the excerpt from 08-3, the "rule" employed is part of the grammar of English; on other occasions, the "rule" has been derived from written or oral remarks Ms. Glass has made during class. Sometimes the rules are wildly inappropriate ones, such as "Don't use IS" or "Always put the focus of your paper in the first sentence." The following excerpt provides an example:

Anne:	[reading] "...Friday, 7:30 am-"
Jeannie:	[interrupts] Wait, wait, wait, I have a suggestion; she told me not to write "a."
Anne:	You can't do that?
Jeannie:	Well, I did it on my last paper and she said, don't do that, don't have a title.... I wrote "a day in the life of somebody" and then I wrote "morning" .. and she said, don't do that.
Anne:	Okay, ..so, like "it is Friday"?
Jeannie:	Yeah; just don't write "Friday."
	(08-2 grp 5)

Here, Ms. Glass's suggestion to Jeannie about the format of an earlier project develops for Jeannie into a blanket "rule"-- do not mark time as a heading. When students comment on issues of mechanics or format in peer response groups, this rule-governed approach is usual.

Discussions about mechanics and format are not frequent; they occur more regularly in the editing pairs Ms. Glass designed specifically for the purpose of proofreading. When these students do discuss these issues, they apply rules rigidly, much in the way described by Rose (1980, 1984) for blocked writers and Shaughnessy (1977), Bartholomae (1980) and Perl (1979) for basic writers. The behaviors of these students suggest broadening the hypotheses about the rigid application of rules; rules may be applied rigidly as a developmental stage in the acquisition of knowledge about written language use. It is likely that only after applying rules rigidly will students learn the fuller and more flexible conditions under which the rules are used. This phenomenon is usual in the acquisition of oral language. When young children learn grammatical forms such as the past tense, they at first overgeneralize the form to include the exceptions to the rule--e.g., "goed" for "went" (see Clark & Clark, 1977). In a perhaps even more relevant example, Labov (1972) shows that rules are overgeneralized by members of the lower middle class as they attempt to make their speech hyper-correct. Students in school commonly hypercorrect as they attempt to adopt the forms advocated by and rewarded by the teacher; the rigid application of rules may be a related phenomenon. We do not know about all the conditions under which student writers use their own rigid rules nor do we know the consequences of such rule application in the acquisition of written language.

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Content. In these classes, evaluation-sheet-based discourse is not directed toward what a writer is writing *about.* In Ms. Glass's class there is always a question on the sheet about "the most interesting/the best part" of a draft (see Figure 1), but the bias of the questions is towards issues of form rather than issues of content. Still students in the peer response groups do react to the content of one another's writing, supporting one another with comments about the ideas and asking probing questions or expressing controversial opinions. Peer-discussion of a draft's content is almost always lively and writer-involved.

Response to content occurs in several ways. In Ms. Glass's class, one of the most pervasive is the interjected positive comment of peer listeners during the reading of a draft. Sometimes listeners react simply by laughing in appropriate places, or giving positive but non-substantive commentary (e.g., mmm-hmm!, uh-huh!, mmm!, huh!). Sometimes, the appreciation is more completely verbalized, as in the following excerpt:

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 grp 7)

Across the data from Ms. Glass's class, there are other, more fully developed, instances of content-focused discussion. Sally begins by reading her draft of her saturation report which is about a bookstore with a coffee-house inside. As she reads, she interrupts herself with oral elaboration about what she saw and heard. Her peer-audience joins 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 grp 4)

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

In Mr. Peterson's class students discuss content in groups when they are completing sheets about the *GE* characters. Students' mutual familiarity with *GE* sometimes leads to a suggestion about additional information the writer could use. In this way the problem-solving discussion turns to a discussion that could suggest content for the students' writing.

[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 grp 6)

The same group is discussing the content of Lisa's paper about Estella:

Geraldine: How many characteristics did you have? Two? Three?
Lisa: I got four. Cold, icy-hearted, intimidating and cruel to Pip.
Geraldine: Cruel? Cold-hearted. Isn't that the same?
Jeanette: Or lonely, she's a lonely person. At the end, remember, she doesn't have any friends or anything left.
(06-5 grp 6)

Mike suggests 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 *GE* which discusses Joe further]. He's good-natured, he doesn't complain.
Donald: I guess I could put more stuff in.
(06-5 grp 4)

In the process of pooling information for the sake of completing the ditto sheet, students remind one another of material potentially useful to the writer. These discussions have a different flavor from those in Ms. Glass's class because in Mr. Peterson's class what a writer can learn from peer-interaction takes the form of information about data, rather than peer-response to the quality of the writer's work.

Peer response to the content of a student writer's work can be viewed from several angles. Content-focused commentary does not necessarily raise the possibility of a writer's discovering a problem or a solution to a problem in his or her draft. Generally, peer interest that leads to discussions of content is both supportive to the writer and a means to a sense of responsibility to, and possession of, the writing. It may lead the writer to generate or clarify ideas. In Ms. Glass's classroom, independence is valued as something a good writer needs to learn; independence clearly entails a sense of authority over one's own work. Although content-based comments from the peer-audience is not

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encouraged by the evaluation sheets, peer talk on content seems at least as useful to the writer as peer talk on how the draft is structured. Talk that is directed by the evaluation sheets is often perceived by students as artificial and only occasionally offers writers advice or suggestion; spontaneous talk on content seems to promote both the writer's commitment to the task of written communication and the evaluator's commitment to the task of listening.

Conclusions. Evaluation sheets serve to organize peer-response sessions in several important ways. They influence the patterns of listener/writer interaction, and they influence the way students spend their time in groups. In Ms. Glass's class, normally, a student reads a paper; there is usually silence while peers complete the evaluation sheets; the next student reads, and so on. The audiotapes are patchworks of reading --silence--comments--reading. The pattern is not rigid. Students interrupt themselves and each other. The drafts being read are often two or three pages long, the evaluation sheets involve several questions, and there is not a lot of time left over for students to veer from the sheets' orientation. Students occasionally go off task and talk about the weekend's plans. On the whole, however, students are on-task, and the demands of the evaluation sheet are being met.

In Mr. Peterson's class, the students do not have to read lengthy pieces aloud, but they have less time to complete the sheets. The pace is fast, and students collaborate around accomplishing a limited task that Mr. Peterson designs to be only tangentially related to improving a writer's paper. The ditto sheets orient peer-listeners to writers in a particular way; writers are primarily resources, and are not asked to take peer criticism as a principle source of guidance for their own reworkings. The groups also do not function as response groups because almost all peer group sessions in Mr. Peterson's classroom present students with this kind of problem-solving assignment, and collaborative thought and writing plays a powerful role in the overall design of his curriculum.

The term "evaluation" on the evaluation sheets and the sheets' focus on structure in Ms. Glass's class produce one set of interactions while the focus on questions about which information the writer is using on Mr. Peterson's ditto sheets results in different interactions. In both classrooms, the need to complete a written assignment about a peer's draft helps to ensure that the students' talk is usually on-task, and in both classrooms peer-listeners enroll writers into helping them complete the sheets.

GROUPS IN MR. PETERSON'S CLASS
NOT GUIDED BY WRITTEN FORMS

No Report Back to the Class

Two of the four response group sessions in Mr. Peterson's class are guided only by oral instructions. The first is described in an earlier section of this article about the classroom context surrounding response groups. In this first session students meet to read paragraphs about the *Great Expectations* character Mr. Peterson assigns to each group and to examine topic sentences. Mr. Peterson asks groups to consider whether the sentences contain generalizations of the type "Henry does everything backwards," or of the type "Because Henry does everything backwards, others find it difficult to live with him." The second type of generalization gives clues about the direction of the writing. Just after students collect themselves into groups, Mr. Peterson adds:

Something's going to happen here... there's going to be, you're going to have collected evidence about this person that the writer of the paragraph isn't using...

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you know things that the person could have said that he doesn't say. All right?
Tell him about that.

Although Mr. Peterson's directions offer students plenty with which to occupy their
12 minutes of group time, analysis of the talk shows that students spend an average of
only 52% of the allotted time on the task, one group giving the response work as little
as 3.5 of the possible 12 minutes. Every group spends time telling one another jokes or
talking about weekend plans, friends, or hair-coloring.

Of the time that students spend on-task, they read one another their paragraphs; on
the whole, the peer-audience offers only phatic feedback. The nature of the phatic
response is exemplified in the excerpts below. The first shows the writer giving the
feedback and the second shows it coming from the listeners.

[Gina is reading her paragraph.]
Gina: [reads] "...I detect a kind of warmth in their character, a sort of sweetness
              that I don't feel for Mr. Wopsle or Mr. Pumblechook. Kind of like grand-
              parents." Period. The end. Everyone listened so well. Okay. Who's next?
                   (01-5 grp 8)

[Geraldine reads her paragraph.]
Lisa: That's good! I like it.
Val: Yeah.
                   (01-5 grp 6)

Across all the data for this session of groups, on only three occasions do students
talk about their writing with any seriousness. On the first occasion, Gina finds a
statement in Liz's paragraph to contradict her own ideas:

Liz: [reading] "...They're quiet, subdued people who like to withdraw from
                social life-"
Gina: [interrupts] Withdraw from social life? I put that they were very active.
Rhonda: I think like, she's got half of it...I think like...they go along with
                everyone else, and don't have a mind of their own, they don't think on
                their own, but they're there.
Liz: Give me an example of when they were active.
Rhonda: Well, they go to a lot of things that are given by the town...I mean when
                they, dinners and everything, they appear.
                   (01-5 grp 8)

The second such discussion occurs in another group when Donald asks Ginnie whether
there are too many judgments in her paragraph. She defends herself by explaining that
she was trying to make a judgment and then support it. In a third group, Lisa models a
topic sentence for Jeannette who is dubious about her ability to write a paragraph at all.
This last is the only mention across the data of the focus Mr. Peterson's directives
suggest for peer group feedback.

As Mr. Peterson moves from group to group during the session, he interrupts with
models, suggestions, and challenges:

Okay, now what did you kids have to say about her paragraph? What did you
say?....Detail? Where's the detail? She pointed out herself that there's only one
little piece of detail.

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When the session is over, Mr. Peterson expresses disappointment about the students' response to one another. He says to the class, "It's the blind leading the blind!"

Reporting Back to the Class

During the fourth week of observation, Mr. Peterson again gives oral directions to response groups. He tells students to read one another their character anecdotes which he has just returned to them with his written comments. For session 04-3, the students are to read aloud and find:

1.   the best opening sentence,
2.   the topic sentence that best gives an idea of what the next sentence will say,
3.   a single paragraph in which all the sentences relate to the topic sentence,
4.   a good descriptive passage,
5.   a sentence with a strong verb, and
6.   a sentence which connects two ideas.

Given the long list, Mr. Peterson writes it on the board; however, there is no dittoed sheet. In this instance, groups will compete with one another for points for doing the best job of locating examples of these writing qualities. Mr. Peterson will judge the groups' oral performances as they feed their ideas back into whole-class discussion. Mr. Peterson frequently organizes groups into teams in classroom games, but usually the games are not played in response groups. Freedman and Bennett (1987) offer a full discussion of Mr. Peterson's group games.

During this session the students work together in groups for 20 minutes. Different groups tackle the task differently. In two of the six groups, students simply read their papers aloud to one another during the time allotted for group work. They pay little attention to the task Mr. Peterson poses. Although there are moments when peer-listeners comment on the content of a writer's narrative, writers are not offered any other type of feedback. The excerpt below, in which Vicki is reading an anecdote about a friend, is typical:

Vicki: [reading] "She always says that God will give you eternal life but if you don't accept Christ you'll go to hell-"
Rhonda: [interrupts] What I want to know is how do they know if they have accepted Christ? They can only say they have.
Vicki: Yeah. If you lie to her, she'll bug off.
Liz: You lie to her?
Vicki: Yeah,...she also says things such as, I care about you, that's why I want you to have the gift of eternal life...drives me batty.
            [reads]
            How's that?
Liz: It's good.
Rhonda: I don't believe her [the subject of Vicki's anecdote].
Vicki: Okay, let's see. So what do we have to do now? ..We have to choose one example of good writing from [reading from the board] okay, let's see--
Liz: So should I go?
Rhonda: Yeah.
                    (04-3 grp 8)

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Next Liz reads her paper. Different group members spend nine of the available 20 minutes reading their papers aloud; Mr. Peterson talks to Rhonda about having a conference with him for another five minutes, and the other six minutes group members gossip about mutual friends. The group never addresses Mr. Peterson's directions. When the time comes for this group to participate in the whole-class "competition," the students whisper hastily among themselves and select a "best opening sentence" on the basis of who is willing to read.

In other groups, students follow Mr. Peterson's directions. The students do not read their papers aloud but rather search through their own and each others' writing for "opening sentences," "topic sentences," and so on. They treat Mr. Peterson's directions as a problem-solving assignment. Group members suggest "candidate" solutions. This problem-solving approach is exemplified in the following two groups' talk:

[Students read one another's anecdotes silently, looking over each other's shoulders, or passing them around.]

Leslie: You know what we should use? From yours, this one. "One of the characteristic traits about her is that she is self-conscious about her appearance."

Nicki: Sentences with strong verbs?

Leanne: How about this--"She splashes and struts in the shower--" for strong verbs.

Leslie: Or how about this? "Every time he shovels food into his mouth." That's strong.

Leanne: I think the best opening sentence is yours. You wanna read it?

Leslie: This one? "My little brother Michael may seem like an angel from heaven to some people, but there are many things about him that says [sic.] otherwise." Okay. Yeah.
        (04-3 grp 4)

Mike: Nick, don't you have one? A verb, a strong verb?

Donald: Yeah, there was a good one [Nick has not read his paper aloud; group members have been reading one another's writing silently]. "Churning," wasn't it "churning"?

Mike: He [Mr. Peterson] said it [my paper] was good.

Nick: He never says it's good!

Ginnie: [reading Mr. Peterson's written comments on her paper] What's a good transition? "A good sentence that connects two ideas." So I've got one of those that's pretty good, I think.

Donald: A connector, do you have a really good connector?

Ginnie: Well, I've got a good one I think. Mr. Peterson liked it.

After other conversation, the discussion continues:

Ginnie: We're missing a good topic sentence, we're missing a paragraph in which--I've got one of those too, but I can't use all of mine. We need one that relates all to the topic sentence. Do you have one of those? A good progression, you know?

[Donald reads one of his paragraphs]

Mike: That's a good one.
        (04-3 grp 6)

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In both groups students treat the task as a treasure hunt. Mr. Peterson does not instruct them to revise their writing. Peers collaborate in picking out "answers" to his "questions." They identify examples of "opening sentences" and "strong verbs" which they want to enter into the "competition." Group members throw sentences and verbs into the pool of peer discourse as potential winners. Although students identify these potential entries as "good," students rarely elaborate on the reasons for their choices.

Sometimes writers like Donald freely offer suggestions from their own work for peer consideration. At other times they tend to denigrate their work and point toward others' examples as "better" than their own. The next excerpt shows Donald's reluctance to "perform" for the class on the group's behalf:

Mike: We'll use this [one of Donald's sentences].
Donald: No, we're not gonna use mine.
Mike: That's [Donald's sentence] interesting.
Donald: What's so interesting about this boring sentence, man? You think, oh, this catches your interest. "The first thing you notice about my friend Nolan is that he is very athletic and loves competition in any sort of way." Interesting, yeah, real interesting [sarcastic].
Nick: I've got a terrible opening sentence.
Donald: We'll use Mike's opening sentence. Yours [Mike] is pretty long. It's pretty good, but it's pretty long.
                (04-3 grp 6)

In the end, the group's selection of the "best" verb or sentence seems to rely more on a writer's readiness to read to the class than on peer discussion about why one opening sentence might function more efficiently than another. Where several suggestions are offered during the response groups, the choice is swiftly made based on which student is most ready to read. Leanne and Leslie provide another example of this selection process:

Leanne: No, I don't want to do it. I like yours better. Or Nicki's.
Leslie: Okay. I'll read mine.
Leanne: Okay. It's good.
                (04-3 grp 4)

Conclusions

Several patterns emerge in these response groups to which Mr. Peterson gives oral directions. First, in comparison with Ms. Glass's response groups which always are guided by written directions and with his own that are guided by written directions, students in these groups without sheets spend more time off-task. Off-task talk is more frequent during the session when students are not required to report back to whole-class discussion (01-5) than during the session when they must report back to the class (04-3).[3] While some off-task talk among peers working in groups is both productive and to be expected, the average of 52% off-task time for students' talk here suggests the need for stronger task-orientation.

Second, in these groups students tend to search for the "answer" to the questions posed by the task, and peer-listeners and writers focus on the search rather than the opportunity to respond to writing. Furthermore, the students in these groups rarely follow Mr. Peterson's directions. They rarely discuss the particulars of a paper's form,

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even when Mr. Peterson's directions ask for such discussion. When students take it upon themselves to choose their topic of discussion and when they are on-task, they gravitate toward discussions of content and meaning, a kind of topic they seem comfortable with and competent to approach.

As when there are written directions, listeners or readers rarely offer writers suggestions or advice, although for both sessions Mr. Peterson orally presents the task partly as a means to possible revisions. Rather in these peer groups, students' writing tends to become a resource for solving problems Mr. Peterson poses: find a "strong verb," "a good topic sentence," and so on. Both writers and peer-listeners tend rather to collaborate towards "solving a puzzle"--throwing out suggestions, breaking the task into segments for resolution. The work of response groups with written directives in Mr. Peterson's classroom as well as his groups serving other functions often involve students in the work of problem solving.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There are many reasons to use response groups and to work to make them support the teaching of writing. In this study I have shown as much what goes wrong as what goes right when response groups are used in two ninth-grade classrooms. On the positive side, these ninth-grade students show how groups help them respond to their own work, as they sense the needs of their present audience. Self-response is stimulated by the groups. Students also use groups to discuss the content of their writing, even when they are not directed to do so. When they initiate talk about content, they encourage and question one another and show evidence that they own their writing. In Mr. Peterson's class the students show that they are comfortable using one another's writing as the terrain for solving specific problems, closely circumscribed by the teacher. These students are not very good at responding on broad topics other than the content of the writing. When students, on their own, ask for help from their peers, the peers rarely give it. Furthermore, the teacher-directed response on dittoed response sheets is resisted by the students, especially when such response is evaluative. The students fill out the sheets because the teacher asks them to. Rarely do they discuss real writing problems or find solutions because of the sheets. And in all circumstances they avoid talk that involves evaluation of another student's writing. These students cannot and do not want to play the role of teacher. They see the role as inappropriate for them both socially and intellectually. This is not to say that students might not take a positive evaluative stance given different conditions. It is important to remember that these students were in semester-long classes and had just come to a new school. They had little time to get to know one another. Mr. Peterson reports that he has some success with true response groups in his twelfth-grade classes, classes in which he has a large number of students whom he has taught before; in these classes he knows the students better and the students, in their fourth year of high school together, know each other better. Also, at some points in Ms. Glass's groups, there are glimmerings of the kind of response we most hope students will give one another.

Certainly groups will work differently in different classrooms and with different ages and types of students. And the teacher's classroom structure and directions to groups, including directions on the sheets, seem to exert a powerful influence. We need additional close studies of how groups actually function in other classrooms working under other conditions and we need well-documented, classroom experiments to show us what matters most in setting up groups. In addition, we need to design studies that allow us to test hypotheses about the influence of group talk on student writing.

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Footnotes

1. The author would like to thank Jane Bennett, research assistant for the peer group study. She both helped with the coding and made significant contributions to the conceptualization of the plan for data analysis.

2. The numerical codes for the session tell when during the period of observation it occurred. The first number stands for the week and the second for the day. Here, for example, 07-3 indicates that the session met during the seventh week of observation on the Wednesday (third day) of that week. These codes always appear in boldface.

3. We did not count the exact amount of off-task talk for Ms. Glass's groups, or for Mr. Peterson's groups with written instructions, because there was so little of it. Clocking the minutes did not seem worth the expenditure of time. We can say with confidence that although there was variation in the amount of off-task time across these groups, generally students were either never off-task or only off-task for a minute or two after completing the assigned task. This behavior is in marked contrast to the average of 52% off-task time for Mr. Peterson's response groups with oral instructions.

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