What I Wish I Had Known about Peer-Response Groups but Didn’t

Ronald Barron

When I was in high school, students did not show their compositions to classmates until after the teacher had rendered a verdict in the form of a grade. If the grade was good enough, we let our friends see it; if the grade was not good enough, we lost the paper as quickly as possible.

When I started to teach composition, I wasn’t surprised when my students reacted in the same way. What point could there be in having another student read your paper? Teachers, not students, I thought, constituted good writing, and I as their teacher wrote elaborate comments on their papers to teach them how to become better writers. Most of my comments were wasted words because my students paid as little attention to them as I had paid to the comments written by my teachers. My intentions were good, but my methods were not.

Now I use peer-response groups in my composition classes—and most of my students benefit because they get feedback and assistance from their peers prior to writing the final draft of their compositions. The quality of their papers has convinced me that students can and should use peer-response groups to improve their writing.

But response groups have not always worked well for me. When I first used them, they were failures because I merely assigned students to groups and expected them to know what to do. I did not teach them how to use response groups effectively. The critical factor in determining the success or failure of the method is what happens before students get into their groups to read each other’s papers. The groups by themselves are not a panacea.

Prior to working in response groups, students must understand the purpose. They need to learn that evaluating the worth of the papers written by other members of the group is not the primary goal of good responders. Nor is an “error hunt” a valuable approach to the task. Instead, members of effective response groups treat the papers they are examining as “works in progress” and recognize that their goal is to serve as sympathetic readers suggesting methods for writers to use in improving their papers. Ideally a dialogue should be created between the writer and other members of the group which clarifies the intent of the writer’s essay and sharpens the way it is achieved. This mind-set is not easy to establish, but it is critical in achieving success with response groups.

How do I promote this mind-set? Modeling of the process is essential. My experience with response groups has convinced me that usually when students are not on task in their groups, it is because they do not know what to do or they do not understand why the task is important, or a combination of these two reasons. Therefore, students need to study what peer-response groups do and then practice using peer-response techniques.

**Modeling Peer-Response Groups**

*Published Models*

*Student Writers at Work, Second Series* (1986, New York: St. Martin’s), edited by Donald McQuade and Nancy Sommers, provides a useful first step in introducing peer response. (I use the second series, but the other volumes in the series work equally well.) McQuade and Sommers provide a brief introduction to the process, recommending the use of what they call *observations, evaluations,* and *end comments* in responding to papers. *Observa*-
tions are nonjudgmental statements about what writers have done in composing drafts of the paper. These statements may address any component of the essay from the content or organizational level to the sentence or word level. The observations may cause writers to revise their papers, or they may reassure writers that what they attempted to do is recognizable to an independent reader. Evaluations move beyond merely describing what the writer has done to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the draft under consideration by the group. However, the responsibility and authority to do something about the evaluations rest with the writer of the essay. A viable option for any writer is to ignore the comments made by members of the response group. Finally, end comments provide writers with guidance which should help them set goals for the next draft of the essay and formulate an achievable plan of revising to meet those goals. McQuade and Sommers provide students with a clear explanation of the tasks they will be asked to perform for each other, but even more valuable are the student examples included in the text. The examples are particularly useful because students can see how four experienced peer responders commented on the text and how writers made use of or, in some cases, disregarded the comments of their peers.

Student Models from Former Students

Although McQuade and Sommers' text is useful in teaching effective peer-response techniques, other methods and other terminology can be used to accomplish the same goal. One alternative method I have used is to duplicate particularly good examples of peer-response work done by my own students during the previous year. (See Figures 1 and 2 for examples of peer responses to a first and third draft of the same paper.) These examples not only provide good models for current students to study, but they also help create credibility for the task: if students from previous classes have been able to handle the task efficiently, so can the students in my present classes. A variation is to have a group of students from the previous year's class conduct a mock peer-response conference for students presently taking the class. This approach has two primary assets: students can see how effective peer responders work, and they can ask those effective peer responders questions about what they have observed. Usually the question-and-answer session leads to unsolicited testimonials from the experienced peer responders, thus making the technique more attractive to the inexperienced students. A final alternative method involves videotaping a good response group. Although this method does not allow students to question the participants, it does have the advantage of being easier to schedule than a live mock conference. Any of these methods should provide students with a clear conception of what they will be expected to do in their own response groups.

In-Class Practice with Teacher's Draft

Once peer response has been introduced, the next step is in-class practice. For the first practice sessions, I provide students with an early draft of a paper I have written. During the past few years I have tried two different methods for conducting these practice sessions: (1) having the students go through the paper individually and then using the following class period to list their comments on the board, following the listing with a discussion and evaluation of the worth the comments might have to someone revising the paper, or (2) having students work in groups preparing a "master" copy for their group, duplicating the master copies.
from individual groups, and devoting a class session to a discussion of what the groups suggested. The first method is quicker and entails slightly less work for the teacher, but I prefer the second method because it is closer to the type of activity I expect students to perform when they respond to drafts in their own groups.

For the modeling to be effective, teachers must be willing to let students respond to early drafts of their own writing, an experience which can be intimidating the first time, particularly if they want students to believe they are "experts" on writing. Revising the paper extensively prior to giving it to students defeats the purpose of the activity and usually is recognized by students. A polished paper severely limits the opportunities students have for suggesting revision options, sending the message to students that they cannot provide useful advice about how to improve a paper. Although it may be intimidating, allowing students to respond to an early teacher-written draft does pay dividends for students and for teachers. Students are more willing to share their writing with other students if their teacher has done the same thing first. Also, students see that even experienced writers need to revise their papers, sometimes extensively, to clarify their writing and to achieve quality final copies. Finally, students learn that inexperienced writers are capable of helping even experienced writers improve their compositions. The benefits to teachers? Students are more willing to approach peer response with an open mind, retaining judgment until after they have worked with their group for the first composition assignment of the class. More important, students write more effective and more interesting papers. What more could any teacher who has to read those compositions ask for?

But I don't stop with the "mock" peer editing session. For the session to have maximum benefit, I revise my draft using the students' comments. The revised copy is then given to students, and we discuss where I followed their advice and where I ignored it. More important, we discuss why I followed the course of action I did. Ideally, if time allows, students should be given a second chance to respond to the "revised" copy.

Wouldn't professional models work just as well or better than teacher drafted examples, particularly if the teacher were able to find examples of work-in-progress? My answer to the question is "no." Use of professional models allows some students to use the "cop-out" that "so-and-so should be able to do that because they are professional writers, but I'm not a professional so don't expect me to do the same thing." However, I have one even stronger objection to the use of professional models. One of the almost cliché phrases about writing instruction is the injunction to students to "show not merely tell" while they are writing. The same "rule" should also apply to instruction about the writing process. I believe I project greater sincerity and have a greater impact on students if I "show" how a technique works for me rather than merely "telling" students what they should do.

In-class practice sessions should be repeated later in the course. These "refresher" sessions can focus on what is and isn't working in the students' own groups. These latter sessions will be done from a position of knowledge which makes them extremely valuable to students.

Forming Peer-Response Groups

How many people should peer-response groups have, and how should their composition be determined?

Trial and error has taught me that four people is probably the best size for a group. Assuming a fifty-five- to sixty-minute class period, an efficient peer group can provide useful feedback on four papers. Also, a four-member group seems to facilitate discussion of the paper. If a group gets too large, some students may be left out of the discussion, or a teacher may have to institute some "rule" to ensure equal participation opportunities. Neither alternative is desirable. On the other hand, if a group is too small, students do not get sufficiently diversified responses to their papers, thus limiting the value of peer response.

Author's Note: I would like to thank Cindy Houlon, the writer of the paper, and her three peer editors (Amy Swanson, Mary Schulz, and Peter Gilbertson) for allowing me to use a sample of their work in this article.
A brightly colored ribbon tied back my shoulder length black hair. All around I could feel the excitement. The stands were filled with expectant coaches, family and teammates. The morning sun was still cool and slowly making its way to its peak. I looked over at my coach Kim Case and my best friend, Kim raised a fist and smiled, nodding her head. She stood by the finish line (near the outside lane.)

With a burst of nervous energy I strided down the track towards the other girls in my race. My light weight shoes Nikes dug into the soft new red track. My energy pushed me forward with out my brain consciously working at each stride. As a mechanical voice called for us to line up in our lanes, One by one we were given our assignments. As the start neared the tenseness in my stomach tightened. By nature jumping around from foot to foot and up and down on both feet. I felt springs in my feet legs as I moved about to release my anxiety. The girl next to me tentatively wished me luck and I smiled only half hearing her voice.

The starter raised his gun and all of us froze.

**BANG!**

The race had begun. With a quick In a matter of seconds we filed into a line. Many fought to keep up with the leader. I felt strong but I stayed back toward the back. I had run this race so many times yet regions was always different. This was my third year at regions even though I was only a sophomore in high school.

The first lap I had just finished my first lap with a good time even though I was in last place. As I rounded the began the second lap I quickened my stride. I began to near the next runner in front and passed her with ease. I could hear the heavy breathing and pounding of the feet of the girls that had gone out too quickly. One by one I passed girls on the outside of the pack.

By the end of the third lap I managed to pass every girl but one. My legs began to feel tired. I had to push myself for each stride. My arms felt like dead weights. My head was pounding as the last lap loomed in front of me like another mile. I had never felt this before. I ran out of sheer will to finish. As I rounded the last turn with 200 meters left, the pounding of feet came up behind out of nowhere. I fought but one by one they began to race ahead of me.

**Figure 1. Cindy’s first draft.**
I crossed the finish line in seventh as I heard the timer yell 5:40.

The disappointment of being passed drained from my body. In a rush Kim and my other team-mates circled around me with hugs and congratulations.

The tired feeling had disappeared. I had worked all season to get a 5:40 in the 1600 m, and I had done it.

The emotions you tell us about are interesting, but could you tell us more? It would help readers experience the event with you.

The conclusion is too quick. Work now on bringing out the significance of the experience. You have chosen a unique experience -- most people would only write about a race they won.

I like the subject you have chosen. Reveal more about what you were thinking. The little you tell us makes me want to know more.

The introduction isn't very catchy. Tell us more about Kim. I expected to find out more about her.

The membership of peer-response groups can be determined in a wide variety of ways, ranging from random assignment to balancing groups so all of the best or all of the poorest writers do not end up together. Since rapport contributes to the effectiveness of a group, I allow students the option of setting up their own peer groups; however, I tell them I will rearrange the groups if they do not function effectively. After the peer-group practice sessions, my students select their own groups if they have a preference. Students who do not express a preference are randomly assigned to groups. One suggestion I offer students prior to selecting their groups is that they probably should not be in a group with their best friends since they would likely seek their responses anyway. They will derive the most benefit by getting additional responses from students they would not normally ask to read their papers.

Periodic teacher monitoring of groups is extremely important and enables teachers to recognize problems and to try to solve them before they become critical. If problems arise that cannot be resolved, I change the composition of the groups. But using response groups is not a "miracle method" which works equally well with all students. Teachers need to understand that there may be some students who do not function well with any group. In such cases teachers have to work with those students to try to improve their group participation, but in the end they may have to be content with placing these students in groups where they do the least harm.

**How often should peer groups meet, and what should they actually do?**

I schedule peer groups to meet twice for each composition assignment. The first time the groups
meet they focus on the global components of the composition such as the organizational pattern, additional material that may be needed, places where the paper could use emphasis or clarification, and unrelated or unnecessary material that may sidetrack the reader. These global components should be the subject of the first session because problems at the sentence and word level may change or disappear as the writers make large structural or conceptional changes during the revising process. To keep the focus on these larger components of a composition rather than on more limited items, I suggest that students read their papers to each other rather than exchange written drafts. However, I strongly recommend that students take notes during the discussion of their papers so they will not forget the advice they receive from their peer group. When students revise their drafts, they decide which advice has merit and which advice doesn't match their goals for the composition.

For the second peer session I require students to exchange drafts because the focus of this session should be on the word, sentence, or paragraph level, for example, sentence variety, word choice, punctuation, and the like. I also encourage students to provide copies of their papers to other group members prior to the day of the response group meeting. This practice allows other members of the group to provide a studied response rather than being restricted to a first impression.

Although I would like to devote more time to response groups, the time available in my composition course prevents it. However, my students are encouraged to convene their groups outside of class when and if they feel the need. As the course progresses and students learn the benefits of peer response, groups meet more frequently on their own, or at least individuals exchange drafts of their compositions outside of class. I even see students going outside of their own group for additional feedback—probably the major testimonial to the value they place on peer feedback. Success with their first papers makes students believers in the technique.

Where does the teacher fit into the writing process once students learn the importance of peer response?

First, teachers sit in on group sessions to determine how efficiently the groups are operating. During those observations teachers can expect to be asked for advice about the drafts under consid-

eration by the group. In these situations I attempt to act as any other member of the group, giving my frank response to the draft but consciously resisting the temptation to take over the group. A second way teachers can participate is by making individual conference time available for students who request it. In other words, the use of response groups does not preclude teacher input, but it does change the nature of the input. Rather than the teacher determining when and what input is necessary, students determine when they need such input and what specific help they require. Sometimes students request a great deal of help with a particular assignment; at other times they feel quite content to proceed on their own with little or no teacher assistance. I consciously strive to become only one source of advice about how to write a composition, rather than trying to be a "writing seer" who knows all and tells all about how to complete the assignment. This approach to composition closely resembles the way students will have to handle writing outside of school.

Prior to having students write a first draft, I have them study effective models, usually strong papers written by students during the previous
year, but sometimes I also use professionally written examples. We then spend class time discussing the unique qualities of the types of writing students will be expected to do, as well as trying to reach a consensus about what makes the models effective. When students discuss what makes a piece of writing effective, they have a better understanding of how to write a composition of their own which incorporates those priorities. The discussion of quality papers can also lead to teacher and/or student-generated guide sheets which can be used both by the response groups in suggesting revisions of works-in-progress and by the teacher in evaluating final compositions.

What are the qualities of successful response groups?

My observation of and participation in peer-response groups leads me to believe that success requires the following conditions:

1. **Tolering and respecting other members in the group.** Good response-group members recognize that although all compositions need to be comprehensible to other people, not all papers have to be written in the same way and for the same purpose. "Variety is the spice of life" may be a cliché, but it is a cliché containing more than a kernel of truth when applied to writing. Students should also recognize that not all members of their group will be of equal value to them at the same point in the writing process, but by the time they have "finished" their papers, all group members will have been of some value to them. The diversity of skills available within the group is one of the major assets of peer response. Some people ask effective questions about the content and purpose of the composition which may help writers clarify their meaning. Other people are more effective at suggesting alternative wording or phrasing both to clarify meaning and to avoid repetitious patterns. Finally, some people are most comfortable dealing with spelling, punctuation, and other components of final editing. In short, relying on one person for response limits the value of the technique.

2. **Working outside of class.** If students have revised their drafts to the best of their own ability prior to meeting with the group, the group will be able to devote its time to what the writers could not accomplish on their own. In addition, writers will have an incentive for seeking the response of others, either to find out how well their own revisions have worked or to seek better alternatives than they have been able to generate on their own. By contrast, students defeat the purpose of response-group meetings if they come to their sessions unprepared or poorly prepared. The group cannot respond well to a rough draft of a composition if it is so rough that peers cannot follow it. This observation may seem obvious, but as most experienced teachers know, common sense is not always common in the classroom, so it is probably a good idea to make the point about preparation with students while discussing effective peer response.

3. **Focusing the group response.** Writers should think about what kind of assistance they are seeking from the group. As they draft their papers, I recommend that students write reminders for themselves about the nature of the advice they need, so they will not forget to ask about those items during their group sessions. Indicating the assistance they need increases the likelihood that the responses writers receive will be functional and on target. Otherwise, students may get "shotgun" responses, random responses which might help them revise, but which more often than not seem to miss the very areas where the writers need help. This approach also helps to make clear that the final responsibility for the assignment lies with the writer, not with the group. Group members advise, but writers have to decide which advice to follow, particularly since they may get conflicting advice. A side benefit of this procedure is that while they are constructing questions to focus the attention of their group, writers sometimes see options for revising they did not recognize while they were concentrating on the print copy of their paper.

4. **Presenting alternatives, not ultimatums.** The phrasing of suggestions for revision is as important as the nature of the comments. The key point for students to remember is that they are making suggestions. Presenting alternatives for revision makes clear to writers that group members want to help them improve their papers while at the same time allowing the writers to maintain ownership of their compositions, an important consideration if students are going to improve as writers. Presenting ultimatums about ways to revise accomplishes
All around me I could feel the excitement of Regions. The stands were filled with expectant
coaches, family, and teammates while runners moved about trying desperately to relieve their
anxiety. Tears and pain along with joy and pride were evident in the expressions of those
who had already done while anxiety and fear raced through the minds of those who were waiting for their
chance.

A brightly colored ribbon tied back my shoulder length black hair and my light-weight Nikes
dug into the new red track. I slowly strided down towards the far end of the track to loosen my
tightly coiled leg muscles. My mind replayed (fast forward) every race I had run since 8th grade
as I tried to focus on today.

A mechanical voice called for us to line up in our lane assignments. One by one we stood in
our positions as the starter announced we had five minutes until the start. I hopped from foot to
foot releasing ache as I did before every race. I felt springs in my toes as I moved about to
release the pent up butterflies in the pit of my stomach.

"You can do it!" exclaimed Kim, my coach.

I looked over, and nodded half smiling. I had never worked so hard for anything as I had
for Regions that year. The long, hot afternoons with Kim and that ever present stopwatch
reminded me of how prepared I was. Together, Kim and I had planned nutrition, worked to
improved my overall fitness, not just me. She had been there for me through the good
days and bad days. I had learned to depend on her support.

I looked over at her Kim again to see her confident smile and her raised stopwatch. I smiled
back, this time with strength and no doubt in my eyes.

The starter raised his gun and all everyone froze.

"BANG!"

The race had begun. In a matter of seconds we filed into a line. Many girls fought to keep up
with the leader, but I stayed back. I had run this race so many times. I unconsciously picked up a
rhythm and strided along without thinking about each step. How did you feel about your
pace?

Before I knew it, I finished my first lap with a good time, even though I was in last place. As I

I felt the excitement of Regions surround me.

Your second paragraph helps me understand what you were
experiencing.

Figure 2. Cindy's third draft.
rounded the first curve of the second lap I began to quicken my stride. I neared the runner in front of me and passed her with ease. I could hear the pounding of my feet of the girls who had gone out too fast. My mind never focused except on the girl in front of me. I felt nothing except the natural pace of my stride as I passed girls one by one on the outside of the pack.

By the end of the third lap I managed to pass every girl but one. My mind cleared as I could sense victory. I wanted to do more than anything else. I pushed my body forward with all my effort. I began to feel the first signs of fatigue. Every stride became a tedious effort as the last lap loomed in front of me like another mile. My arms and legs felt like lead weights as my mind began to spin. The sweat was dripping off my face in a constant flow as I gasped for every breath. I kept running on the will to finish only out on the sheer will to finish. I rounded the last curve with only 200 meters left. My ears heard muffled tones of the crowd screaming as we neared the finish.

I pushed but my body resisted. Pounding from behind pushed me forward to yet once more. The other runners passed me. My last ounce of energy helped me reach the finish line in seventh place as I heard the timer yell "5:40." The disappointment of placing seventh drained from my body as I processed what I had just heard.

"You did it! You did it." screamed Kim as she raced over to hug me before I could react.

In a rush my other teammates rushed over to congratulate me. They all seemed very distant though. Everything was fuzzy except Kim and her stopwatch. She raised it slowly so I could see the time. Dark digital numbers read 5:40.

"I did it!" I said quietly with a grin.

I can imagine your emotional state much better after reading this draft. I also understand why you wrote about this event even though you didn't win the race.

Your new opening paragraph is more effective because it catches the excitement of the experience. Waiting until the second paragraph to focus on yourself is a good idea.

The conclusion is stronger now than it was. The importance of achieving your personal goals rather than winning the race is clearer in this version. I understand Kim's role in the experience better.
the reverse. Self-assured writers resent the way they are treated by the group and tend to ignore advice, good or bad, that they receive. For less confident writers, the consequences can be even worse. Even if they produce a strong final paper, they have no real sense of ownership of what they have produced. A more likely occurrence, however, is that their final draft will lack a consistent voice or point of view because they tried to incorporate all the advice they received without exercising any judgment about its value or the way it conformed to their intentions in composing the paper. In the end, these less-confident writers will have received reinforcement for their belief that they do not write well nor will they ever be able to write well.

3. Indicating both strengths and areas where revision is needed. Students do not always know, or at least they are not always sure, what is most effective in their own papers. Sometimes writers can be too close to their own compositions. Fresh ideas and phrasing do not always seem original because the writer has worked with those items over a period of time. Reading a draft supportively by focusing on its strengths also provides the writer with an incentive for revising. The time spent clarifying and polishing seems worthwhile if the writer believes the paper contains material someone else wants or needs to know. A good guideline for peer responders is to attempt to apply the biblical golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” when discussing the draft of someone’s composition.

I encourage groups to set as a goal producing the four best papers in the class, not just one good paper. As one student said in her evaluation of my composition course this year, “When someone in my group got an A on a paper, I also felt like I had received an A.” Although that ideal goal of producing the four best papers is not always attainable, how will students and, for that matter, their teachers know if it can be reached unless students try to accomplish it? Trying sometimes leads to pleasant surprises. A more realistic group goal

---

**The important point is not to junk the technique because it does not work well with all students.**
should be to produce four papers which are all better than what individual writers could have produced on their own. That goal is within the capabilities of all students.

One of the purposes of a composition course should be to make students more confident and more independent writers. Peer-response groups help accomplish this purpose. In addition, good responders tend to become better writers. For most students, as their ability as responders improves, their ability to revise their own compositions also improves because they have a better sense of how to approach the task.

However, teachers should not expect all members of response groups to gain the same benefits from the experience. Teachers need to tolerate some partial failures even though they may have worked extensively with individuals trying to improve their performance. The important point to keep in mind is not to junk the technique because it does not work well with all students. Also, teachers may not experience as much success with peer-response groups as they wish the first time they try them. My own experience is a good case in point. Experience and modification of the technique to fit the individual personalities of teacher and students are necessary for success with peer-response groups, just as with almost every other effective teaching technique. However, teachers who devote time and effort to instruction in the use of response groups will be rewarded when students write better papers, feel more confident about their writing skills, and view writing as a positive experience rather than one to be avoided.

Richfield Senior High School
Richfield, Minnesota 55423