

1996

Peer groups in the writing process

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Lyons, Jayne E., "Peer groups in the writing process" (1996). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2815.
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Abstract

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Peer Groups in the Writing Process

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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Summer 1996

This Project by: Jayne E. Lyons

Entitled: Peer Groups in the Writing Process

has been approved as meeting a project requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

10/9/96
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Abstract

Recent research on children's writing suggests that there are positive benefits from peers learning from each other as well as from teachers. This paper presents ways that teachers can provide a supportive environment in which peer groups can facilitate the writing process. Through interacting in large or small peer groups, children can assist each other in progressing through the recursive components of the writing process and in generating knowledge about the composition process.

When we were in grade school and high school, most of us did not view writing as a process but as a product. We had little or no ownership of the process. Our teachers usually told us when to write and what to write. We began our writing knowing we would get red marks all over our papers if we did not meet the teachers' expectations. However, if what we wrote was acceptable to the teacher, we got a good grade. Our most important goal as we wrote was to please the teacher. This form of writing was called the product method.

In recent years, the teaching of written language has shifted from the product method with only the final product considered to the process method with a focus on the meaning created by the writer. The process is ongoing and controlled by the author.

Also, a trend in written language is the importance placed on interaction amongst peers to build a true community of writers that assist in each other's emerging writing abilities. To build a community of writers, the responsibility for engaging in the writing process needs to be turned over to the students (Angeletti, 1993). As students form a community, their collaborative writing can make a significant difference because they come to value each other's contributions and celebrate each other's accomplishments (Hansen, 1987).

Teachers in the lower elementary grades are learning that encouraging students to be active participants in instructional program can produce positive results. Studies of peer teaching for more than two decades have shown that properly used peer groups benefit everyone--students and teachers (Lehr, 1984).

In this article I want to promote the positive effects that peer-mediated strategies can have in the writing community of elementary children and share some guidelines and ideas that have been found to be successful in using peers collaboratively in the writing process.

Justification for Peer Groups in the Writing Process

Many studies of the process method of writing have been conducted in the last few years (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1994). They have concluded that process writing motivates children to write more, improves their grammar usage, and develops a greater sense of community through writing at virtually every grade level. Graves (1994) states, "Students need to hear the responses of others to their writing, to discover what they do or do not understand" (p. 108).

Peer interaction in process writing can transform learning from a private to a social activity (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989). They state:

By involving learners in responsibility for their own, and more importantly, other people's education, it increases social interaction within an educating institution and between different types of educating institutions, making the process of learning, as well as its end product, more rewarding. (p. 16).

Cooperative writing groups in which peers interact can take place at all levels of schools: elementary schools, high schools, colleges and higher education. Quite often the collaboration has occurred in larger groups than pairs (Topping, 1995).

Peer writing conferences in which students are hearing the responses of others can occur at any point in the writing process. The writing conference setting can occur with one other student, a small group, or the entire class. When the students are involved in a conference, they are forming a community which provides further teaching and demonstration opportunities.

Angeletti (1993) relates, "With the development of a community comes awareness of audience and the need to revise and edit for the reader" (p. 494). In the community, children are encouraged to seek information from each other. When they do this, they are using the building blocks of a community. These building blocks are the chunks of each other's knowledge (Hansen, 1987). During conferences, children can ask their peers questions about their involvement in the writing process and describe their

own writing strategies. These interactions that involve sharing and responding can extend the reading-writing process (Calkins, 1983).

Positive Effects of Using Peer Groups in the Process Method Benefits of Peer Writing Groups for Writers

When students work with other students during the writing process there are several advantages to this learning situation that make it superior to sitting alone and writing in isolation. Children can pick up topic ideas from each other. When children are sharing their writing, the writing that is going well serves as a stimulus for others in the class. Sometimes, writers just need the ideas of other minds to jumpstart their own (Graves, 1983).

Children can view peer evaluation as less threatening. Many students who react negatively to criticism from their teachers are more willing to accept it from their peers. When students write for their peers, remarkable things can happen. They discover they are writing for an audience whose opinions matter to them and whose standards are compatible with theirs. Children will learn more rapidly from peer example than from teacher instruction (Graves, 1983). Bulgarella and Long (1985) relate that:

Interaction in small groups is desirable because it leads to clashes of points of view that encourage children's development of individuality, creativity, and ability to think. When they are free to accept or reject someone else's idea, they mobilize the totality of their knowledge to evaluate it. (p. 171)

When children in a peer group setting want to convince others of their suggestions, they have to step back and think about someone else's point of view as well as their own.

When writers are preparing for editing groups, they will take more care in preparing even their first drafts if they know that other students will be reading their work (Brown, Phillips, & Stephens, 1993). Peer writing strategies can promote group cohesiveness and cooperation and facilitate the development of responsibility to a group (Salend, 1987). Additionally, they can foster mutual respect and learning among ethnic backgrounds (Sharon, 1980).

Benefits of Peer Writing Groups for the Teacher

A teacher using the process method cannot possibly respond to all of the students' work. By gradually shifting some of the responsibility for teaching and evaluation to the students, teachers free their time for other duties related to teaching writing, such as teaching students how to read and instructing in form (Harris, 1992).

When a teacher uses peer groups in the writing process, other positive effects are: The teacher can model writing by being able to write by his/herself. The teacher can be a facilitator of groups. The teacher can circulate through the room checking on the progress of groups. The teacher becomes available to hold conferences with individual students with less interruptions. Also, peer response groups develop a better sense of audience, reduce paper grading, expose students to a variety of writing styles, motivate them to revise, and develop a sense of community (Gere & Abbott, 1985).

Conditions Needed for Encouraging Peer Interaction in the Writing Process

When the conditions for encouraging writing are created in a classroom, then good writing can take place (Graves, 1994). Through interaction in small to large peer groups, children can assist each other in progressing through the recursive process of writing and in generating knowledge about their pieces of writing. Children can help each other find and limit their writing topics, can offer suggestions as writers seek to clarify ideas in their draft and refine their use of mechanics, and can serve as an appreciative audience as the work is published by the author (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1983). Several suggestions for fostering successful peer writing sessions can be considered.

Supportive Learning Environment

For the positive effects of peer writing to occur, it is not sufficient just to provide opportunities for writers to interact. A climate of trust and mutual respect must be established. A teacher can begin to create this environment by writing with the students and by demonstrating a positive regard for each writer through the questions and comments offered in peer settings (Smith, 1983). It is important that the teacher makes it clear that certain types of critical or derogatory responses are not allowed in peer writing settings (Church, 1985). If the children are going to see themselves as writers, they must maintain ownership of their pieces of writing. When children share writings with each other, they are taking risks and becoming vulnerable, so how they respond to each other is of vital importance.

Children need to be shown the appropriate way to talk with each other. Atwell (1987). says, "Peer conferences won't work unless writers can trust that their peers won't shoot them down" (p. 42). Blake (1992) states, "As they begin to internalize the rules of peer writing conferences, they learn they can construct critical and supportive ways of talking to each other that helps them become better writers" (p. 609).

When the community of writers in a classroom has a nurturing and supportive environment, it can turn the teacher's

role in the process method into a real pleasure (Angeletti, 1993). When the environment promotes student-initiated and student-controlled peer writing conferences, then the students' writing can flourish (Blake, 1992).

Sharing Sessions

Students who are writing individual pieces often need the reactions of a group while they are in the midst of their first draft. The sharing session, a large group or small group activity, can come at the end of a writing session to enable students to get feedback. To initiate sharing sessions, the teacher can ask for two or three volunteers or select certain children to share what they have written thus far. The children who are sharing their writing can be asked to tell the group one thing their piece is about. Then, the audience of children will be asked to listen carefully because when the author finishes, they will tell him/her what they remember about the piece. Graves (1994) says, ". . . children need to learn how to listen to a text so they remember before they ask questions." (p. 64)

Teachers can help structure the sharing session by establishing guidelines to assist children in accepting reactions from peers (Whittaker & Salend, 1991). Examples of suggestions include the following:

- Listen carefully to all comments
- Ask for feedback from as many individuals as possible.

- Do not dispute another person's reaction.
- Do not dismiss feedback from others.
- Seek further clarification or examples if you do not understand what your peer is telling you.
- Check your understanding of the reader's reactions by paraphrasing the statements in your own words. (p. 129)

In these sessions, the new pieces children have been working on and the progress of their writing can be shared. What children can share in this type of session is virtually limitless. Graves and Sunstein (1992) offer some examples of questions a teacher can pose in a sharing session:

- Did anyone who was writing fiction today create a new character?

What did you name the character? How did you choose the character?

What is going to happen with your character? How come?

How old is he/she?

What does your character look like? Read that part.

Read the part where your character talks.

- Was a new form of punctuation tried?
- Did anyone try to experiment with their writing and try something new? Did it work or do you need help to make it work?

- Did anyone try a poem, a piece of fiction, or a personal narrative as a different form of writing?
- Did anyone use some words that they liked that enhanced their piece of writing?
- Did anyone have trouble spelling a difficult word? How did you figure out the correct spelling?

The sharing session can also be used to conduct a mini-lesson on a specific writing convention. The children can share information about how they use this convention in their writing. Also, a list of conventions can occasionally be presented on a chart, a bulletin board or a sheet in a bound folder. The students can be asked which specific ones they know how to use in their writing and their responses can be recorded (Graves, 1994). Then, the children know which peers to go to for assistance if they are working on a certain convention.

Also, a mini-lesson can be used to introduce children to the various aspects of a piece written by a published author. Picture books and trade books can be used for having children listen for different elements (Graves, 1994). They can listen for:

- How the author wrote his/her beginning and ending.
- How the author used verbs to bring the story to life.
- How the author helps you to visualize where the story takes place.

- How the author handles conversation.
- How the story reminds them of something they have written or other books they have read. (p. 140)

It is important for both teachers and students to remember that the sharing session is not a show-and-tell session, but it is for a purposeful dialogue (Atwell, 1987). Calkins (1983) calls sharing meetings "a vehicle for helping children become good writing teachers" (p. 126). In the writing community, children are demonstrating writing opportunities to each other.

Quiet Sharing

Quiet Sharing involves each writer finding peer readers who will read his/her piece and write a response on an index card attached to the piece (Calkins, 1983). This strategy can be used within one classroom, between classrooms in one building, or even between buildings or grade levels.

Praise-Question-Polish (PQP) Method

An organizational technique peers can use in peer response groups is called P-Q-P Praise-Question-Polish (Neubert & McNelis, 1990). The P-Q-P technique requires peers (usually two to five per group) to take turns reading another peer's draft aloud as other students follow along with copies. By peers doing this oral reading, the writer can hear the piece in another voice and identify possible changes. The responders in the peer group then can react to the writer's piece by writing comments on blank

paper attached to the writer's piece, or students can orally give feedback by identifying the effective parts of the draft. They can also raise questions about those aspects of the paper that are unclear to them. Finally, the peers can help the writer to decide how to improve or polish the draft.

The teacher can prepare the students to engage in the P-Q-P Method by presenting these suggestions for appropriate peer response: First, the students need to know and understand that revision is a supportive process designed to improve writing. Second, the feedback that students receive should be positive and helpful. Peers should be able to identify what is good and what needs more work. Lyons (1981) suggests these guidelines for the student author to ask: "(1) What do you like about my paper? (2) What questions do you have about my paper? (3) What kind of polishing do you feel my paper needs before it can be published?" (p. 42)

Peer Editing

Peer editing occurs after revision for content and organization and is the final component in preparing a piece of writing. Peer editing involves mechanics. Pieces of writing are exchanged with peers; they search for errors of form (e.g., punctuation, capitalization, and spelling). Calkins (1986) relates, "Children help each other, they talk punctuation and

spelling, they use each other's strengths, they need less input from teachers." (p. 207)

In the case of spelling errors, peers can often spot misspelled words in someone else's work more quickly than in their own (Gordon, 1984). When children are encountering editing problems with spelling, they can be encouraged to go to a classmate, have the classmates draw circles around words spelled incorrectly and then check those words in a word bank or dictionary (Hansen, 1987).

Preliminary instruction in peer editing is important. Teachers should demonstrate how to edit samples of papers containing selected print conventions before providing students papers to edit. With younger and less proficient writers, it may be best to focus editing on no more than two items of form (Whittaker & Salend, 1991). These forms can be presented to students in a checklist. Also, after a small group has had a mini-lesson on a specific form, they can be asked to edit each other's writing for that form.

Author's Chair

The author's chair is a special chair in the classroom that is only used for the students to publish orally their writing. The more special the chair, the more special the reading and celebration of the author's work with others will be. Teachers need to structure a place and time for student authors to share.

The student audience can meet on a rug or carpet squares or sit on chairs different from the author's chair. Hansen (1987) states:

The child in the Author's Chair knows what's inside the heads of the circle-sitters because everyone has sat in those chairs. The ordinary chairs show at a glance who is different, but at the same time, their presence prevents the authority from being alone. (p. 221)

Usually, the authors who will share will be designated by the teacher before the session begins. Previous to sharing the authors may practice reading pieces aloud to a peer or to their peer group so their publishing will progress smoothly. Then, the sharing of written works becomes a genuine composition-comprehension connection (Graves, 1994).

At the end of the sharing of a writing piece in the author's chair, several children may volunteer to offer comments to celebrate the occasion. Clapping after each child shares a piece can become a pro forma ritual. The approval meaning nothing. Graves (1994) says, "Clapping is unnecessary unless it is truly spontaneous and celebrates an obvious victory for the author." (p. 133)

Summary

The methods of using peer involvement in the writing process can assist students in thinking about and improving their writing abilities. Conferencing in peer groups has much potential for supporting children's emerging writing. These interactions that involve sharing and responding can extend the writing process. During conferences, children can ask their peers questions about their involvement in the writing process and can describe their own writing strategies (Calkins, 1983). Writing need not be completed to be shared. Frequently, students only receive feedback from others concerning their writing after a piece has been completed. By then, it is too late for much sharing or responding that is related to the process.

The talk in peer conferences is a crucial component of the writing process approach. First, peer writing groups provide students with real opportunities to interact, to share ideas and suggestions and to respond with appropriate speech. As students begin to internalize the guidelines of peer writing conferences, they learn that they can construct critical and supportive comments to share with each other that will assist them in becoming better writers. Second, the talk in peer writing conferences is crucial for helping students begin revision of their drafts. Third, students feel a greater sense of community as a direct result of their talk in these peer writing

conferences. Finally, children's writings will become more elaborated and clearer as a result of the talk around their pieces and as they write for audiences. As others respond to their writing efforts, students gain confidence and their self concept is improved.

Peer interaction in the writing process plays a vital role in the writing process. If the writers see themselves as a part of a community of learners, they will want each other to do well. The response and feedback from each other will nurture their attempts at constructing meaning through writing.

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