

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 4

1-1-1988

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Sharon and Steinberg, Michael (1988) "The Alligator in the Fishbowl: A Modeling Strategy for Student-Led Writing Response Groups," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1698>

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**THE ALLIGATOR IN THE FISHBOWL:
A MODELING STRATEGY FOR STUDENT-LED
WRITING RESPONSE GROUPS**

Sharon Thomas and Michael Steinberg

We'd all like to teach in writing classrooms where students work cooperatively with each other and with us. But in experimenting with collaborative learning techniques--specifically, peer response groups--we've found that many students have difficulties adjusting to group work. A good number are unsure of their group roles; others are reluctant to make critical comments; some don't believe that they are even capable of giving useful advice.

These problems arise out of a basic fear of taking risks. Having spent years doing grammar workbook drills and exercises, and listening to lectures on writing, students have learned to be passive responders. For many, it's the path of least resistance. Others tell of situations where they've departed from a particular teacher's prescriptions and instead of being rewarded for taking the initiative, they've found themselves punished or reprimanded. It's no wonder then that they seem tentative and skeptical when we present them with a "new" group approach.

But that doesn't mean that students aren't active, engaged learners. Away from class they participate in all sorts of group activities: team sports, perfor-

mances, clubs, and other extra-curricular activities. All of these depend on collaboration, sharing, and risk-taking. As a way of encouraging students to use those abilities in the classroom, we've devised a modeling activity--"fishbowl" feedback--which introduces students to writing response groups.

Our intent in using fishbowl demonstrations is three-fold: to give students an idea of the options and possibilities available to them during peer-group activities; to encourage them to participate in activities which will help one another grow; and to build a classroom community. Although we happen to use this activity in our freshman college composition classes, we are sure it can be easily adapted to the high school and middle-school classroom community.

One note before we explain the fishbowl: In discussing ways of giving and receiving feedback, we distinguish between "response" and "editing." "Response" feedback is writer-based: it is expressive and informal and it directs itself mainly at the writer's content. Generally it is most useful in the early or discovery stages of composing, when the writers are still exploring and experimenting. "Editing" feedback is reader-based and more formal. It directs itself to matters of structure and style. As such, it is most useful to writers in the later stages of composing.

Our first fishbowl of the term, therefore, is a "response" session. For example, when our students first listen to (or read through) a fellow writer's rough draft, we ask them not to critique it but simply describe and tell what they "hear" in the writer's draft. We begin this way because many students tend to jump right into formal editing and critiquing. In the early stages of writing, student writers need to be encouraged to explore and to discover their

ideas. So, when students respond informally to the content of a writer's rough draft, it often helps the writer to discover or re-think the draft's meaning.

As the students begin to shape their drafts for an audience, we do another fishbowl demonstration on how to give and receive formal "editing" feedback. During this session, for example, students might discuss a draft's style, voice, structure, focus, support, and so on. Then, as the piece comes to closure, we ask students to carefully edit each other's final drafts for surface corrections.

The fishbowl demonstration we'll describe below is an early term "response" session. The basic procedure goes like this:

1. After they begin a piece of writing, students must bring their rough drafts to class. The draft can be either a structured piece or a free-flowing, still-looking-for-ideas draft. Our only request is that the piece be at least two double-spaced pages.
2. As a way of prompting them to think about possible questions to use when they're responding to each other's drafts, we ask the students to answer this question: "If you had access to the most wonderful editor in the world who would give you just exactly the help you needed, but who wouldn't give you that help unless you asked the right questions, what would you ask?" As the students volunteer these questions--questions like "Were my ideas clear?" "Was there anything confusing?" "Where do I need more examples?" "Can you follow what I'm saying?" "Is my point clear?" "How can I make

my draft better?"-- we list them on the board under the labels, "Responding" and "Editing."

3. Now we begin the "fishbowl." We ask for one volunteer to read his or her draft aloud to a group of four or five other students. This group sits in the middle of the room (the fishbowl) and the rest of the class sits in a larger circle surrounding them.
4. Before reading aloud, the writer chooses three or four questions from the list on the board. For example, the writer might ask, "What can I do to make my point clearer?" or "Can you guys help me get a better introduction?", and so on. The writer then reads the draft aloud. Group members listen and jot down their responses. Knowing that inevitably those questions will lead to other suggestions, initially we try to direct students to confine their written responses to the three or four questions suggested by the writer.
5. Then an oral discussion of the paper begins, in which the group answers the writer's questions and makes suggestions for improvement. If we feel the responders are being too critical or harsh, we suggest that they talk first about the most successful parts of the draft. In the best possible scenario, for example, the responders might suggest a more interesting introduction or some examples or details that the writer needs to explain why he/she feels a specific way. As the group discusses the draft, writers can take notes or simply listen in on the conversation. If writers feel that they are not

getting useful feedback, they can join the conversation, ask more direct questions, and/or offer additional information.

6. Once the discussion ends, we ask the entire class--including the demonstration group--to do a short written response which asks them to consider things like whether the writer was specific enough in asking for feedback, which of the group's comments seemed most helpful, what problems they observed, what suggestions they would make for improving the group, and so on.

7. Finally, we call for a few volunteers to read their responses aloud. As students offer comments, we record their suggestions on the board. By the end of the discussion, we've compiled a list of helpful guidelines for effective group work. We then type up and photocopy this list and hand it out to the students for future reference.

This is, of course, a best-case speculative scenario; but regardless of how the first fishbowl session goes, we've found it to be a good ice-breaker.

In the past, we've used the activity at the beginning of the term, solely as a prelude to the first peer responding and editing sessions. But, because of its success, we've recently begun doing additional fishbowl sessions as refreshers and follow-ups.

A description of one of these "fishbowl" sessions might be useful at this point, so we'd like to describe an actual early-term session that occurred recently in one of our classes. In this particular class--a freshman comp section--the students had already generated a list of questions and formed the

"fishbowl." They had agreed on a procedure: after the writer had read his or her piece and asked some questions, the group would discuss these questions while the writer listened in and took notes.

Mark, a big, gregarious football player, volunteered to read his draft. The paper, a kind of free associative personal essay, was written in response to an "interest inventory" of topics that the students had made up themselves. Mark chose to write the story of how he once got caught by his parents when he sneaked home from college one weekend to visit his girlfriend.

After Mark read aloud, it was apparent to us that the story's strong suit was its appeal to its audience--fellow college students. Because this was an early draft, it had some problems typical of most rough drafts, discovery writing: Mark had left out some major events which were important to the story and he had included some irrelevant information, usually in the form of dialogue. He'd also neglected important transitions and time markers.

Predictably, the student responders were shy about taking the initiative. Some hadn't even bothered to take any notes. To get things started, Mark asked the group if they could follow his paper. If not, he inquired, what could he do to make it clearer? After a longish, uncomfortable silence, Karen, a talkative, friendly girl, began the responses. She made several general comments about how good Mark's paper was and how much she enjoyed hearing the story about his girlfriend. Then abruptly she stopped.

After a few moments of more uneasy silence, she began again. This time she asked, "Why didn't you want your parents to know that you were coming home to visit your girlfriend? How did they find out you were there?" Mark

started to respond, but another member of the group pointed out that he was supposed to listen, take notes, and respond later.

Laura, a quiet, serious girl, volunteered next. She, too, said that she liked the paper; but she wanted to know why Mark had called his brother-in-law when his car broke down. She also wanted to know how Mark got back to school. Then Jim, a smallish, shy boy, chimed in. He wanted to know why Mark had included all that conversation with his roommate--something about a test coming up. What did the test have to do with going to see his girlfriend?

Then everyone began talking at once and, in about five minutes, they came to the following conclusions: Mark had a good story that they were all interested in hearing more about. But they agreed that he had left out some important events that were necessary to the story; he had included some information that didn't seem to go anywhere; and his chronology was confusing.

Even with the tentative start, after about ten minutes, these students had come to the same conclusions about Mark's paper that most teachers would have. So far, so good.

Then it was Mark's turn to respond. His parents didn't dislike his girlfriend, he said; they just wanted him to concentrate on his schoolwork so that he wouldn't lose his football scholarship. He had been so easily discovered because his girlfriend lived only four houses from his parents. And then came the most important revelation: Mark's sister had seen him and his girlfriend at a local shopping center where they had gone to buy Mark a baby alligator. Finally, Mark told the group that his brother-in-law drove him back to school be-

cause his car had a heater. "I had to keep the alligator warm, didn't I?" Mark said.

As soon as Mark mentioned the alligator, the atmosphere in the classroom changed. Several students sitting in the outer circle tried to make suggestions all at once. We noted their interest and instead of confining the demonstration to the inner circle, we decided that this was a good time to open things up. So we let those in the outer circle join in. "You need to tell more about the alligator. It was the alligator that made you get caught. Why did you buy the alligator in the first place? Why not put something about the alligator in your title?" Now, Mark began to ask his own questions and take notes on what was being said. What should he cut? What should he condense? How could he work the story about the alligator into his paper? And so it went for the rest of the session.

This scenario demonstrates what can happen when students have the opportunity to work collaboratively. Not knowing what was expected of them and not having much experience at this sort of thing, the group started slowly, tentatively. Several times, group members kept looking back at the teacher in hopes that she would relieve them of their responsibility. But, eventually, these disparate, confused students evolved into a group of active, even lively, listeners and responders. Instead of simply correcting Mark's draft, they helped him re-think it. More importantly, they helped Mark discover the key to his paper: the alligator.

After the fishbowl was over, we asked all the students--Mark included-- to do a short freewrite on their responses to what worked and what didn't. In their freewrites, the students were able to point out glitches and successes as well as

make suggestions (which we recorded on the board) for improving future response groups.

Not all fishbowl demonstrations turn out to be as lively and helpful as this one did. Even so, having students model this process almost always helps them to feel freer to respond and to collaborate with one another. Marks' peer group is also evidence that students in the fishbowl learn some specific, practical things about writing, responding, and editing. For example:

- Students become more aware of their audience.* After a few compliments and some general questions, Mark's group got down to business. By the time the students were finished asking their questions and giving their responses, Mark had a very clear picture of his audience and he knew the kinds of information they needed before they'd understand his story.
- Students learn to take risks with their writing.* Mark did. He volunteered to read his paper aloud and found the experience worthwhile. In his final draft, the alligator figured as a major character in the narrative.
- Students learn to work collaboratively.* After wasting some time and not getting to the point, Mark's group discovered new possibilities in his paper as they discussed it with one another.
- Students become more aware of the importance of revision.* By the time the session was over, Mark knew what he had to do next. And he was already beginning to revise his paper.
- Students learn to focus and develop their ideas.* Mark found his focus: the alligator.
- Students learn to identify major (and minor) writing problems.* Mark's paper still had several major and minor problems, but he discovered he could address these in later drafts. As a result of this first session, Mark was able

to work on the problems that needed attention at this point in the process.

In general, the experience of constructively responding to and critiquing each other's writing boosts students' confidence, makes them more aware of the value of feedback, and encourages them to apply more care and scrutiny to their own writing. In addition, each fishbowl experience builds for the next one: The students in Mark's demonstration group were only novice responders, but because they had the opportunity to work together, they discovered some of the problems inherent in group work as well as how to share in the building of a supportive classroom community.

Though certainly not a cure-all for the problems created by collaborative learning, beginning with a few fishbowl demonstrations gives students and teachers an idea of what's possible: given time, guidance, and the opportunity to work with one another in a non-punitive environment, most students can become effective responders and critics.

Having worked with fishbowl demonstrations for some time, we've also learned the value of patience and restraint. Before students can develop the confidence and skill which make response groups work, they need time to explore and to build up some trust among themselves and between themselves and their teachers. Moreover, students do not always know what we mean when we ask them to participate in their own learning. Getting involved in the fishbowl encourages them to use some of the resources they already possess, and it rewards them for applying those resources to classroom learning. Finally, the fishbowl demonstration lets students know that learning how to cri-

tique each other's writing is at least as valuable, if not more so, as teacher input. We've found that often they not only find the problems in each other's writing that we would find, but they discover many inventive solutions that we'd never think of.

In closing, we'd like to suggest that teachers and curriculum coordinators consider using more collaborative thinking strategies like this one at all grade levels, K-college. For although our fishbowl demonstration was originally designed to help students compose an expressive piece of writing, the activity (and others like it) can be useful in guiding students as they write argument, exposition, and analysis--in the other disciplines as well as in our English classes. In asking students to work with each other and monitor their own composing processes, we are encouraging them to speculate, to inquire, to reflect, to formulate questions, and to critique their own and others' writing. In other words, we're indirectly urging them to write and think more critically.

To that end, we've recently begun experimenting with using the fishbowl as a way not only of modelling writing strategies, but also of demonstrating a variety of techniques which connect thinking and writing with literature and other content-area reading. In the final analysis, the fishbowl is a strategy which gives students the chance to become more aware, active, and engaged learners. Such activities are worth whatever risks we, as teachers, are willing to take.

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