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Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom

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Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom draws from a diverse set of contributors both within and outside academia to depict and analyze various writing groups. The editors, Beverly J. Moss, Nels P. Higherg, and Melissa Nicholas, assembled chapters focused on classroom and community writing groups, academic and non-academic groups, female and mixed-gender groups, and groups of varied racial and socio-economic status. Chapters are authored by both writing group members and observers, and employ diverse methodologies (e.g. ethnography, surveys, interviews, reflection). Contributors include primary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers; doctoral candidates across disciplines; community members such as a youth minister, a print-maker, a songwriter, and homeless newspaper vendors; poetry and fiction writers, and writing center administration and staff. The broad target audience includes writing center staff and administrators, writing group founders and participants, and writing instructors.

The editors suggest in their introduction that writing groups should be conceptualized as literacy events. As such, they posit that each group's context informs and binds the formation and functionality of the group. They argue further that groups construct their own identities and behavioral norms, and they suggest that interactions within the group can and do influence group members' writing. In sum, the editors suggest that writing groups are shaped by power relations which influence textual production.

This compilation expands on prior composition scholarship which has established writing groups' significance and history both inside and outside the academy (Gere), as well as work which has demonstrated the importance of examining writing groups from the inside to uncover attributes contributing to successes and failures (Spigelman). In response, the central questions the editors seek to address include: How might gender, race and socioeconomics influence writing groups' power dynamics? How might writing groups impact and be impacted by their local and global communities? What makes writing groups appealing? This volume has two sections: academic writing groups and community-based groups.

The first part is academically situated, although involving some non-traditional academic settings. Rebecca Jackson opens the collection with her essay, "I Don't Talk to Blacks,' or Contextual Constraints on Peer Writing Groups in the Prison College Classroom." Jackson analyzes her experience using writing groups within a maximum security, an all-male prison college-classroom setting. Based on teaching notes, group logs, and informal conversations with students, Jackson develops a categorical scheme

for characterizing students' responses to writing groups within this context: "refusal, masked participation, and negotiated participation" (15). She examines the ideologically problematic aspect of requiring collaboration as an empowering tool which may instead maintain extant power structures. Jackson concludes that it is important to assess the writing group context to determine when individual work might be more appropriate than group work for empowering students. Her work is important in its reconsideration of the ideologies informing instructors' choices in using groups, and those using groups will take away an understanding of the necessity of considering groups' purposes and applications on a case-by-case basis.

In the second essay, "Wrestling with the Angels," Thomas K. H. Piontek, returns us to a more traditional classroom setting. Piontek discusses assigning non-traditional professional texts as starting points for writing groups' collaborative compositions. He suggests this approach helped student writing groups in his classroom develop and apply a rich theoretical understanding of non-traditional writing styles. Instructors trying to incorporate reading into their writing groups may find this essay useful for Piontek's description of his approach.

Two essays focus on the relationship between writing centers and groups. In "Bringing the Writing Center into the Classroom," Julie Aipperspach Anderson and Susan Wolff Murphy explain how and why writing centers may introduce their tutors into writing groups within composition classrooms. They suggest tutors should employ a non-prescriptive, student-centered approach and should model appropriate feedback techniques. The authors provide concrete suggestions for establishing effective communication between tutors, writing center administrators, and instructors which may prove especially helpful for writing center staff and administrators considering expanding services into the classroom. Further, in "Sponsoring Student Response in Writing Center Group Tutorials," Magdalena Gilewicz writes about using group tutorials to help students develop deep rhetorical responses to writing. Based on informal survey data and an extensive review of the peer response literature, she envisions the tutorial as a site for teaching reading, responding, and writing.

Two chapters focus on unlikely pairings in academic writing groups. In "Shaping Writing Groups in the Sciences," Sharon Thomas, Leonora Smith, and Terri Trupiano Barry, drawing from multiple data sources (e.g., surveys, field notes, focus groups), discuss their experiences with implementing writing groups for graduate-level science students. Their writing group model employs both a subject-area and a rhetorical expert within student groups. The authors suggest this model improves graduate students' understanding of rhetorical considerations, assists faculty with their teaching, and promotes writing in the disciplines. These authors contribute to the Writing in the Disciplines literature through their careful depiction of the model employed and their careful examination of how teaching rhetorical savvy can positively impact students in other fields.

In “Reciprocal Expertise,” H. Brook Hessler and Amy Rupiper Taggart describe their experiences pairing post-secondary and primary students as writing partners. The authors analyze the costs and benefits of community service writing groups, and identify reciprocity as critical for community service writing groups. They provide five essential considerations for teaching reciprocity: overcoming resistance to nonacademic discourse, using context-appropriate assessment, understanding collaborative authorship as process, engaging diversity, and negotiating logistics. Their chapter is particularly relevant for instructors and scholars considering the ethical and practical implications of extending writing groups outside the classroom.

Kami Day and Michelle Eodice close out the book’s first section with “Coauthoring as Place: A Different *Ethos*.” Based on in-depth interviews with ten sets of successful academic co-authors, Day and Eodice argue that coauthoring is a type of writing group characterized by an “ethic of care” (125). They suggest the personal relationships developed between successful co-authors may lead to both cognitive and affective benefits. Day and Eodice’s creative reframing of the rhetorical concept of *ethos* as caring provides a smooth connection into the latter half of the book, which moves outside academia, and opens with the late Candace Spigelman’s rhetorically-focused essay—“Species of Rhetoric.” Employing an Aristotelian approach, Spigelman studied a community-based writers’ group, tracing both deliberative (logically grounded suggestions for future action) and epideictic (value-judgments, assessments of text’s current status) discourse characteristics. She finds that both response types are important for writing groups’ success. Instructors, editors, and writing group members will likely find themselves thinking more analytically about the characteristics of their responses based on this chapter. Additionally, the clear connections Spigelman draws between rhetoric and composition are helpful to a sometimes divided disciplinary dialogue.

The next several chapters offer insights into writing groups with unusual circumstances. In “Questions of Time,” Paula Matheiu, Karen Westmoreland, Michael Ibrahim, William Plowman, and Curly Cohen describe the identity-formation process for the *StreetWise* Writers Group, whose members were homeless and formerly homeless newspaper vendors and editors. The authors, all writing group members, recount the challenges of negotiating both individual and collective ambitions when (re)constructing the group’s identity. This chapter is especially relevant to those interested in social justice issues, as the authors describe the possibilities for social change through writing groups. In “Making Space for Collaboration,” Rebecca Schoenike Nowacek and Kenna Del Sol, through a retrospective analysis, consider the impact of physical space and time for two all-female songwriting groups working on collaboratively authored musical projects. They propose that groups should develop a purpose statement, open spaces for changing roles, and reflectively consider the impact of material space. While this group did not deal with traditional texts, the insights these authors provide on physical space’s influence are relevant considerations for both community and academic writing groups.

In “The Thursday Night Writing Group,” Linda Beckstead, Kate Brooke, Robert Brooke, Kathryn Christensen, Dale Jacobs, Heidi LM Jacobs, Carol McDaniels, and Joan Ratcliffe each provide brief personal essays about their experiences as writers and a visual artist in their writing group. Essays focus on the group’s function, as well as its impact upon the members and their composing both within and outside the group. In “A Group of Our Own,” Terri Trupiano Barry, Julie Galvin Bevins, Maryann K. Crawford, Elizabeth Demers, Jami Blaauw Hara, M. Rini Hughes, and Marry Ann K. Sherby, based on an interview session and retrospective reflections, delineate why participation in an all-female writing group was significant in their personal and professional development as female academics. Like several composition scholars (e.g., Gere; Elbow), these authors argue for the importance of a nurturing writing space; they suggest, however, that single-gendered groups are helpful for accomplishing this.

Evelyn Westbrook closes the collection by countering Trupiano Barry, et al. and others who view groups primarily as supportive, nurturing spaces. In “Community, Collaboration, and Conflict,” Westbrook contends that writing groups ought to be conceptualized as contact zones (Pratt). She bases her argument on a year-long ethnographic study of a highly diverse writing group where she examined conflict, members’ identity construction, and “negotiations of difference” (233). Her work provides an important means for rethinking writing group possibilities, in that she challenges the typical understanding of groups as safe-places by articulating conflict’s role within groups.

Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom encompasses myriad group settings and incorporates many voices. This book makes an important contribution to the theoretical conversation on how and why writing groups function by adding to and further complicating earlier observations by rhetoric and composition scholars such as Peter Elbow, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Candace Spigelman. Many of the contributors delve into power dynamics informing groups, which is a helpful counterpoint to previous literature which at times conceptualizes groups through rose-colored glasses. This volume also provides many practical applications useful to individuals interested in writing and writing groups. As the editors acknowledge, the book does not include any materials on digital writing groups, and the individual nature of groups does limit generalizability. Additionally, the contributions vary in terms of their methodological stringency. Overall, however, the text fulfills its stated goal by complicating our understanding of how power dynamics play out in groups, how groups are impacted by their context, and why writing groups are appealing. This collection will likely prove useful for scholars, instructors, and students across the disciplines who are interested in writing; writing center staff, and both academic and community-based writing group members.

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