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An ethnographic study of what occurred in high school peer response groups and how their response related to their revisionary process

Mike Buchta

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WHAT OCCURRED IN
HIGH SCHOOL PEER RESPONSE GROUPS AND HOW THEIR
RESPONSE RELATED TO THEIR REVISIONARY PROCESS

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

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Abstract

Despite the acceptance of peer response as a step in the traditional approach to the writing process in secondary and university level classrooms today, peer response hasn't completely proven itself. It isn't always a successful classroom experience and instructors are divided on the degree of its usefulness. Instructors complain in practitioner journals that students veer off-task, are too uncritical, misunderstand the guidelines or automatically assume that they can't possibly be expected to give good advice.

This troublesome experience with peer response has prompted substantial study. But, according to one researcher, Sarah Warshauer Freedman, instructors should be wary of the weight and scope of the cumulative research conducted in the field so far. Freedman concludes that her 1992 study "shows how much we still have to learn" about the peer response process (Freedman 105).

In an attempt to pursue Freedman's suggestion to learn more, specifically to shed some light on the problems teachers have using peer response, I conducted an ethnographic study of 12 high school students engaged in peer response over a six-month period. The study sought to answer the questions: what kind of interaction occurs in peer response groups? and how effective is that interaction?

I've tried to follow Clifford Geertz's example of an ethnographic study, painting a "thick description" of what went on at a particular time and place. As part of this study, I collected observations of what took place in peer response groups by several different means. I attempted to verify my own observations by getting data from students via written and oral interviews and by examining the revisions students made subsequent to and presumably at least in part as a result of the peer response they received.

My study is not representative of classrooms in general, nor can it generate hypotheses for what will happen in other classrooms. The study is valuable, nevertheless, because it adds to the gathered body of information on peer response and sharpens the resolution of the big picture.

My findings include the following observations:

    - some students put all their energy into the draft to be read in the peer

response group, in order to make a good presentation, but did little
afterward

  - the sexual chemistry of the group sometimes affected its
performance

  - peer response sometimes prompted dramatic changes to a paper
when the paper caused differing opinions within the group

  - students spent much more time talking about a paper that had an
interesting subject than one that didn't

  - revisions to papers following peer response sessions sometimes
weren't related to comments made in the group, and in fact, could be
contrary to what the writers told the group they were going to do to
their paper

This ethnographic study comprises Chapter Three, the centerpiece of my
thesis, and is prefaced by an examination of some contemporary theories of
collaboration and how they affect the structure of peer response (Chapter
One), and by a report of some of the peer response methods and guidelines
that are being used in typical ninth and eleventh grade English classes today,
taking note of how the definition of peer response varies from classroom to
classroom, including a look at some of the problems practitioners and
researchers have encountered with peer response (Chapter Two). The final
chapter of this thesis draws conclusions and suggests appropriate
pedagogical approaches.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the following people, whose input and guidance made this thesis possible:

I thank the students of my English classes at Serrano High School for their cooperation and enthusiasm.

I thank my dear friend, Michael Owen, for his patience and advice.

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Chapter 1
The Foundation: Theories of Collaborative Learning

Like many California public high school English teachers who use writing group activities, I believe in the value of collaborative learning, and assume that writing is a social activity. This basic belief is what connects my approach to those who ascribe to "a social definition of writing" (Gere 55), and whose work forms the theoretical foundation of this paper. Although people have worked together to solve problems since the beginning of time, the notion of do so in the American classroom, as part of the process of writing, is relatively recent. In fact, the great majority of English teachers today were themselves taught in the traditional classroom setting where students work competitively and independently, nay *secretly*, noses to their own work, on their compositions, only to be shared with the teacher, the arbiter of correctness.

For the purposes of this thesis, the theoretical foundation for collaborative learning is seen as a pyramid, with behavioral science at its base, giving broad psychological support, and the pedagogical theory specific to the teaching of English placed at the top.

At the foundation is the modern view of the social aspect of language learning, which has been heavily influenced by the work of Lev Vygotsky and Jerome S. Bruner. Vygotsky, an often-quoted Russian researcher and theoretician in the psychology of human functions, believes that language development is an interactive activity and maintains that higher level thinking skills "lie outside the individual -- in psychological tools and interpersonal relations" (Vygotsky 15). According to Vygotsky, social-functional relationships are critical to a child's development, and a child's mind cannot operate logically in a vacuum:

> The acquisition of knowledge and logical forms involved are
> considered as products of the adjustment of one set of thoughts to

another. The practical confrontation with reality plays no role in this process. If left to himself, a child would develop only delirious thinking. Reality would never teach him any logic. (Vygotsky 52)

Vygotsky further points out that, in becoming literate, children internalize the structures of socially meaningful literacy activities, and become more advanced in their thought processes.

He also makes much of the fact that the presence of the written word itself is a new and higher level of abstraction over the spoken word, in that the written word is removed from the concrete reality to which it points.Just by moving from strictly oral language to written language, the child is using higher cognitive levels. And, as Bruner points out, this is mostly done at school, the heart of a child's social interaction:

> School imposes indirect demands that may be one of the most important departures from indigenous practice. It takes learning, as we have noted, out of the context of immediate action just by dint of putting it into a school. In school, moreover, one must follow either the abstraction of written speech - abstract in the sense that it is divorced from the concrete situation to whichthe speech might originally have been related - or the abstraction of language delivered orally but out of the context of an on-going action. Both of these are highly abstract uses of language. (Bruner 283-284)

Both Vygotsky and Bruner are concerned with the psychological and developmental aspects of language learning, which they see as growing out of a communicative and sociocultural relationship. They occupy the base of the theoretical pyramid, and the ramifications of their work go far beyond the English teacher's classroom.

Their views, then, place "language at the center of knowledge because it constitutes the means by which ideas can be developed and explored,"according to another theoretician, Anne Ruggles Gere (73). But in addition to behaviorist theory, Gere also finds theoretical support for collaborative learning in social theory. In her 1987 work, <u>Writing Groups - History, Theory and Implications</u>, she states:

> The enduring concept of alienation and the continuing struggle against it - a struggle that began with economists and poets of the Eighteenth Century, developed with Marxism and mass society theory, and continues in some schools of contemporary literary criticism - provides a theoretical foundation for collaboration. (Gere 66)

Gere goes on to say that "theories of collaborative learning, then, build

upon an opposition to alienation...and emphasize the communal aspects of intellectual life" in which "the individual genius becomes subordinate to social interactions and intellectual negotiations among peers" (Gere 75). This Marxist approach ties the author's writing to its public, with the importance stemming from the discourse community and the social contexts. For Gere, "writing fits comfortably in the domain of collaborative learning because writing demands dialogue between writer and context" (Gere 73).

Gere also responds to the ideas of contemporary composition theorist Kenneth Bruffee, whom Gere says has "incorporated Vygotsky's views" (Gere 84) in his highly influential articles on writing groups (84). This is evident in Bruffee's explanation of the dialectic of speaking and writing:

> If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internal conversation, then writing is internal conversation re-externalized... ("Conversation of Mankind" Bruffee 641)

Bruffee's first essay on collaborative learning appeared in 1972, twelve years before the article cited by Gere. In that earlier article Bruffee clearly makes his feelings known:

> ...the concept of teaching as a kind of intellectual and informational philanthropy is at best dated, it seems to me, and at worse condescending and perhaps corrupt. A teacher is properly not a donor, but a *metteur en scene* whose responsibility and privilege is to arrange optimum conditions for other people to learn. He creates relationships between himself and students, and above all, among students themselves, in which students share power and responsibility as well as information, not peripherally, but in the very process of learning. ("The Way Out..." Bruffee 470)

Bruffee's views on collaborative learning lost none of their fire over the years subsequent to his first writing on the subject, but they did become more focused and refined by the time he wrote his seminal and often quoted article, "Collaborative Learning and the `Conversation of Mankind'" which traces the modern history of collaborative learning and addresses the particulars of how English and literature should be taught. According to Bruffee, the term collaborative learning was coined in the 1950s and 60s by a group of British secondary school teachers who were

heavily influenced by a study done by M.L.J. Abercrombie on the training of university medical students. Abercrombie found that students learned faster working together than working individually ("Conversation of Mankind, Bruffee 637). In America, collaborative learning came to the college classroom in an attempt by instructors to find a solution to the poor performances of students in the early 1970s. Bruffee says that collaborative learning was established as an alternative to traditional classroom teaching.

He broadly defines the practice of collaborative learning as "a form of indirect teaching in which the teacher sets the problem and organizes students to work it out collaboratively" ("Conversations of Mankind", Bruffee 637).

Central to Bruffee's ideas on writing groups of any kind is the importance of conversation: "what distinguishes human beings from other animals is our ability to participate in unending conversation" ("Conversations in Mankind" 638). Referring to Vygotsky's work on the relationship between thought and conversation, that reflective thought is public or social conversation internalized, Bruffee concludes that before reflection, there must be social conversation. He states, "the first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better..." ("Conversations in Mankind" 640).

More specifically, Bruffee feels that peer groups must converse when they get together. And he makes it quite clear that their conversation must not become evaluative: "what students do when working collaboratively on their writing is not write or edit, or, least of all, read proof. What they do is converse" ("Conversations of Mankind" 645). Their topics of conversation should include, he says, the subject and the assignment, the writer's understanding of the subject, their own relationship, the relationship in an academic context between students and teachers, and most of all, the act of writing.

As a theoretician, Bruffee is also instrumental in advancing the notion that all of the above may take place as either *normal* or *abnormal* discourse, with the function of the former being to maintain and pass on knowledge and the latter to generate new knowledge. According to Bruffee, abnormal discourse exists "when consensus no longer exists with regard to rules,

assumptions, goals, values or mores" ("Conversations of Mankind" 648). He's saying, in effect, that when instructors see disagreement within a group, they are actually seeing healthy critical thinking. According to Bruffee, new knowledge is gained when "abnormal discourse sniffs out stale, unproductive knowledge and challenges its authority..." ("Conversations of Mankind" 648). This concept is significant because it gives value to what a teacher may initially perceive as problematic conversation within a peer response group. Gere also addresses this lack of consensus in groups, but rather than term this behavior as "abnormal" she says that "such negotiations demonstrate the capacity of writing group participants to work together in creating knowledge" (74).

In sum, it is Bruffee's belief that "our task (as writing teachers) must involve engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and the reading process as possible, and that we should contrive to ensure that students' conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write" ("Conversations of Mankind" 642).

Peter Elbow, a widely read proponent of the "teacherless classroom",agrees with Bruffee on the roles that the writer and peer reader must play while engaged in their conversation about writing. Elbow advises the writer to ignore the reader's comments when they appear to be assessing the work instead of reacting to it: "If he (the reader) gives you mere evaluations, advice about changes to make, or theories about writing, they are of no value to you in themselves" (103). According to Elbow, of importance to the writer is how the reader "perceived and experienced" (103) the words on paper. And those words come from the inner, reflective conversation within the writer's mind. He says that when writers are first drafting an assignment, they are "building someone to talk to" and should "just talk onto the paper" (Elbow 55). Elbow also emphasizes the need for any student writer to receive as many reader's reactions as possible, with the teacher serving as a guide and another reader reacting to the paper. This approach adheres quite well to Gere's belief that "Learning, when conceived in collaborative terms, assumes a socially derived view of knowledge and opposes a fixed and hierarchical one" (75).

The teacher, then, is there to witness and to participate in the conversation. And the conversation should be about the paper at hand. As Gere states, writers' texts, "indeterminate, unfinished occupy the center of writing groups, uniting theories of collaboration and learning" (75). It is important to note that Gere acknowledges that although the processes of collaboration underline the social dimensions of writing, "the individual writers still retain ultimate responsibility for their work" (76). This is an important distinction, for any theory of collaborative learning must allow for individual grades, which remain the backbone of evaluation in public high schools today.

My own classroom philosophy behind the peer response activities reported in my ethnographic study emphasizes group dialogue and sharing, making it fairly consistent with Bruffee. However, he heavily favors conversation over any kind of evaluation, whereas my students both converse (during a reader-response activity) and evaluate (filling out a criteron checklist). I feel that time is an important factor with any classroom activity, and checklists seem to keep my students' responses focused on the paper. My teaching of writing as a process, with three separate drafts, reflects Gere's view that students must think of their work as something that must be changed and revised, that the "indeterminate text" occupies the center of all writing groups.

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Chapter 2
Theory into Practice :
The Use of Non-Judgmental and Evaluative Response

Collaborative learning is a relatively new teaching tool, and although it has been defined and refined in composition over the past 20 years, it's still in the process of defining itself in the classroom, where the concept of collaborative learning means different things to different people. Practitioners, as a rule, don't swim upstream. If something doesn't work, they change direction, and the successes and failures of collaborative learning activities in the English classroom have spawned numerous changes of direction. For example, compositional group work can mean many different activities depending upon the instructor: peer editing, peer evaluation, brainstorming groups, peer tutoring, peer feedback, peer review, and lastly, the topic for this thesis, peer response. The theory behind each is common in foundation, that knowledge is a social construct, but the activities span the spectrum from strictly non-judgmental responses to critical evaluations.

This chapter will compare and contrast some of the predominent peer activities used in today's high school and college classrooms, all born in the name of collaborative learning, and review some of the research into the effectiveness of peer activities in composition classrooms.

Peer groups are most often tried in those English classrooms where students are taught that writing is a process, as something recursive, and as something that is being shaped and re-shaped until the very last word of the final draft. Peer group activities usually require students to seek each other's feedback on a rough draft of a paper, although group work can be employed in a variety of ways, such as at the beginning, for the invention or brainstorming phase, and at the end, when students read their papers out loud.

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The kind of feedback that students are directed to give is the defining element of the peer group activity itself. Walter Lamberg's defintion of feedback is simply "information on performance" (Lamberg 63) - but this may be positive or negative, specific or general, global and conceptual or dealing with proofreading errors.

As it's usually used in classrooms today, peer response, the subject of this thesis, can require both positive and negative feedback. Sarah Warshauer Freedman recognized this varying definition of peer response when she studied how ninth grade students interacted as a peer response group. She concludes that "the point is that the label `peer response' is subject to a great deal of variety, much more than the literature admits, and researchers need to be very careful and specific in attempting to discuss or make generalizations about response groups" (Freedman 101). Freedman reported several kinds of peer response group activities in the two classrooms under study, and one can only imagine the possibilities when one takes into account the gamut of classrooms across the country.

There are any number of manifestations of peer response groups, as Freedman points out, but they may be basically divided into two feedback catagories: evaluative (criteria) and non-judgmental (reader-response). This isn't to suggest that teachers always use either one method or the other. In fact, they often use both, which will be discussed later.

Peer response takes much from the work of Bruffee, with his emphasis on conversation, not critiquing, between reader and writer. When students follow a pure reader-response format, they avoid giving judgment on each other's compositions, concentrating instead on reporting their own feelings, observations and impressions. An example would be found in the classrooms of teachers trained to follow Peter Elbow's (1973) model for peer response. In this classroom, the writer reads his or her piece twice, without commenting on or apologizing for the selection read; listeners, who have no copy of the manuscript, do not write during the first reading, but after it they record their strongest impressions. During the second reading, listeners make detailed notes and afterward the listeners comment about their impressions. This type of feedback attempts to trigger an empathy within the reader, a relatively easy task to accomplish, according to a study

of peer audiences done by Thomas Newkirk. Newkirk maintains that "the sheer frequency of statements of this type (emotional) suggest that this willingness to identify with the author is a powerful determiner of student response" (304).

This reliance on emotional response is precisely what bothers some teachers, however. They fear that students working in groups will soon be relating to each other much more than responding to the text at hand, and they therefore require that work groups have specific evaluative tasks to keep the students focused on the text. For these teachers, peer response isn't just reader-response, where students only seek impressions. In these classrooms the students also seek help. But what is to be evaluated?According to teacher Ronald Barron, the emphasis should be on content, and not the mechanics:

> Students in response groups 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. (Barron 24)

According to Barron, an excellent model for peer response groups is offered in Student Writers at Work, Second Series, edited by Donald McQuade and Nancy Sommers. One recommended model includes the use of a responding process made up of observations, evaluations and end comments. Observations are considered to be non-judgmental statements about a draft, and may address a specific component of an essay or may simply reassure the writers that what they attempted to do is recognizable to an independent reader. Evaluations, in this particular response model, "move beyond merely describing that the writer has done to asessing the strengths and weaknesses of the draft" (Barron 25). There is a condition to this evaluative input, however, that Barron says tempers the evaluative nature of the process, keeping it in the realm of response rather than critique: "A viable option for any writer is to ignore the comments made by members of the response group" (25). But it could be easily argued that students always have the option, regardless of the kind of peer activity employed, of accepting or rejecting any peer response to their papers. The

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freedom of the writer isn't the issue, then. What is central is the amount of judgment being asked for. Those instructors uncomfortable with asking students to be overly critical, for example, favor evaluation that is broad and global:

> With evaluative responses, the writer is informed of the success of the writing. Was the writer's purpose or aim achieved? If the story was to be humorous, did the readers find it funny? If the essay was to be persuasive, did the readers find it convincing? Which `parts' of the composition did readers find effective? Was the dialogue natural, the metaphor fresh, the plotting suspenseful? (Lamberg 65)

But researcher Thomas Newkirk argues that students can and should be critics of all parts of the composition, and that peer responders must assume the teacher's criteria for good work: "if students are to enter into the evaluative community of the instructor, they need to see the norms of their new community applied to student work" (Newkirk 310).

Newkirk's opinion appears to be particularly persuasive. It would seem logical that if a teacher has standards for writing, then the students can also be standard bearers, and act as such when reading each other's compositions. Peer "evaluation" shouldn't be a perjorative term. After all, evaluation is part of schooling. Report cards are a fact of life. Student performance must always be evaluated, particularly in light of the recent "back-to-basics" movement that seeks to certify that students be able to demonstrate specific skills for every grade level. Nevertheless, Elbow, Macrorie and Moffett have been influencial in advocating impressions and empathetic responses over evaluation, and writers like Robert A. Liftig say that teachers who gear response activities to find mistakes do so partly because of the nature of the educational system itself:

> Positive phrasing of criticism has also gotten short shrift, often when teachers feel their instruction must respond to administrative demands for traditional accountability or when cautious veteran teachers feel they had better sift `new' approaches through their personal `filters' derived, more often than not, from a generation of employing traditional criticism with its emphasis on syntax, grammar and spelling. (Liftig 62)

Liftig reports of his experimentation with a peer evaluation guide that avoided the kind of critical comments that in the past had reportedly made the student writer defensive. Peer evaluators in his classes were asked to tell the writer about memorable phrases, scenes and why they liked them,

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as well as to select one element of the story that they wanted to read more about. Students responded favorably to this kind of positive evaluation, he claims, but he's not clear whether "favorably" means an improved composition. Most notably, the students were overwhelmingly in agreement about the type of comment that they felt was most important: those that "validated their artistic purposes" (Liftig 63). Those comments that students felt were the least important were those that delt with "errors, misreadings, and confusions in plot, character and setting" (Liftig 63). It would seem, however, that an English class, be it college or high school level, should have more on its agenda than the artistic purposes of the writers. Liftig even admits that some students had reservations about this kind of positive evaluation, and indicated they preferred some kind of criticism. The issue of non-judgmental peer response versus evaluative peer response is a thorny one, and apparently even the students themselves aren't quite sure what they want when they offer up a draft for a peer's consideration.

To circumvent this dilemma, some teachers prefer to distinctly separate the peer exchange process into two stages, based on Donald Murray's proposal that the revising process is both internal and external. One instructor, Marie Foley, divides her collaborative peer revising sessions into "work-in-progress groups" and "editing groups." The former groups function in a reader-response format, and the students ask global questions and are trained "to discover what is valuable in each other's work" (Foley 119). In editing groups, the students "work as real editors do in preparing a piece of writing for publication" (Foley 120), which is to focus on paragraph and sentence structure, as well as those broader questions raised earlier in the work-in-progress groups. In Foley's classroom, peer editing and mechanical correction are separate but equal with Bruffee's required "conversation."

All the peer exchange methods mentioned in this chapter so far could fall under the heading of peer response, depending upon the aims of the instructor. They can be catalogued by where they lie on the spectrum that spans the distance between completely non-judgemental (empathetic)

responses and those that are only critical (evaluative). Most methods contain elements of both.

The amount of judgment and critical evaluation required of the peer responder significantly affect peer guidelines, as well as the role of the teacher. Some proponents of the decentralized classroom believe that peer response guidelines of any kind are a hindrance to the students' dialogue. Though this may seem strictly in keeping with Bruffee, it actually isn't. In his ground-breaking "Conversations With Mankind" essay, Bruffee supports the notion of teacher-designed guidelines, saying that "collaborative classroom group work guided by a carefully designed task makes students aware that writing is a social artifact..." (642). Citing Bruffee and Vygotsky as authorities, Harvey S. Wiener in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, explains that "a written task provides the language that helps to shape students' conversation" (241). It would seem logical that the extent of the written guidelines could be reduced if a class was highly motivated, and certainly upper college level writing classrooms would need less guidance than a high school English class.

Nevertheless, drawing on the ideas of Peter Elbow, college instructor Paul Vatalaro argues that tasks designed by the English teacher don't work, because "instructors traditionally fail to "relinquish control over the formulation and administration of the peer review instrument to their students" (21). This instrument, usually in the form of a checklist or questionnaire designed by the teacher and filled out by the peer responder, is a staple of peer exchange activities in the English classroom today. Vatalaro believes that any teacher-derived guide, even the open-ended reader response types, saps power and confidence from the students:

> When teachers conduct peer review exercises by asking students to fill out sheets that list essential criteria, or by instructing them to respond `freely' to a piece of writing, however, they violate its democratic chemistry... (21)

But the question can be asked: is it important that peer review exercises be democratic. In a true democracy everyone has a voice, and no English teacher would bar this from their classroom. But few high school teachers would give up their mantle of authority if the students voted them out of office. All guidelines are unacceptable, according to Vatalaro, because

"students still treat the whole activity as a chore" (24). His solution, taken from Elbow's <u>Writing Without Teachers</u>, is to have each of his classes construct whatever method or methods of evaluation and response they want to experiment with, and to later evaluate these procedures and their outcome. He sums up his approach - which he labels "peer review" - by stating, "We (instructors) want to prepare them and then let them play. In this way we locate a fertile midpoint between abandoning our students altogether and dominating them completely" (Vatalaro 28). When Vatalaro uses such highly-charged words as "abandoning" and "dominating" it appears that he finds the teacher's role in the classroom to be fraught with danger, and apparently should be as limited as possible. It seems doubtful that many teachers would accept this characterization. Is it domination when a teacher models and instructs the students, making it clear which responses are the most constructive based on the teacher's experience and study, and gives guidelines that reinforce things learned in the classroom?

Nevertheless, Harvey S. Wiener joins Vatalaro when he states that "the teacher's presence as a group member challenges one of the basic tenets of collaboration in the classroom" (243). This tenet, which he attributes to Bruffee, dictates that the purpose of collaborative learning "is to help students gain authority over their knowledge and gain independence in using it" (Short Course 49). Wiener says that teachers must solve this problem by learning restraint when conducting peer response groups: "the best teacher is usually the seemingly most idle teacher." This might be true, but certainly administrators must be apprised of this fact in the event they happen upon a peer response activity that finds the teacher seated at their desk munching an apple. It seems that Vatalaro, and those who look to Elbow and other advocates of the teacherless classroom, want to make all school work a choreless task, which is an unrealistic, if not somewhat skewed, vision of a classroom utopia. If none of the chores get done around the house, what would be the household's state of affairs after three weeks? Teachers are a necessary ingredient in the system as it now stands. And that system requires grades. A grade is a measure of how close students come to what is expected of them. The expectations must come from the teacher. But the good teachers try to teach their students how to meet those expectations.

It's important to note that when Vygotsky made it clear that social interaction was critical to a child's development, that learning couldn't be done in a vacuum, he wasn't excluding the teacher. Classroom social interaction includes the teacher. Learning by interaction doesn't mean that learning is done in only a peer environment. If there are no teachers, no one with advanced knowledge, it would seem logical that an advancement in peer knowledge would be gained very slowly. Teachers should be part of the mix. After studying the writing and thinking of four college classes in four different subjects during the 1980s, a six-member team concluded that "peers seemed unable, without considerable guidance and instruction, to help each other with major issues in...reasoning" (McCarthy, Walvoord 239). The study also revealed that the peer groups functioned better when they had specific guidelines.

It's as if those who follow Elbow's teacherless classroom want the classroom to be oddly homogeneous - no teachers, all students. And, because there can be a great disparity in student ability, with some students approaching teacher-status, it would seem that Vatalaro would prefer that these students be removed as well.

Most teachers, particularly at the high school level, see the need to model and guide the students in their peer response efforts. Thomas Newkirk suggests that if students are to enter into the evaluative community of the instructor, they need to see the norms of their new community applied to student work" (310).

Those norms can be introduced via "peer response"guides for the students. Some guides are very non-judgmental and others are more on the evaluative side, and nearly all have elements of both. An example of the latter kind of guide is that used by Edgar H. Thompson:

1. What things do you like best about the piece, and why are they good?
2. Is there anything that doesn't seem appropriately addressed to the intended audience? What, and why not?
3. Is there anything that makes you say "So what?" or "Specify!" ? If so, put these words in the margins where you think they will be helpful.
4. In the margin, write `Say more,' `Expand,' `More details,' or something like this at points where you as a reader need additional

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information in order to participate more fully in the event or the idea presented.

5. Underline words that are used improperly and phrases that don't seem to "make English." Place question marks above them.

6. How close to being ready to be turned in to a stranger for evaluation is this piece?

Circle one number: not ready 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ready. (Thompson 114)

Thompson's guide, by posing questions that seek more than just impressions, is more evaluative than a strictly reader-response based guide would be. Question number one is asking for only positive impressions, but later students are asked to consider such things as intended audience and whether enough examples are given. Elbow's influence is evident from the guide's implication that a successful interaction is one that allows the responder to personally relate to the topic of the composition.

What is the teacher's role in peer response?

There is wide-ranging opinion on the teacher's role during collaborative learning in general, and during peer response activities in particular. Teacher Richard Whitworth says that, in the seventh grade, the teacher is "constantly on the move: monitoring the group's progress, offering advice if the youngsters seem confused or stuck, suggesting alternatives if student plans go awry, demonstrating how to behave as a contributing member of the group..." (15). There are fewer behavioral concerns the older the students are, but Whitworth's observations of his seventh graders would generally hold true for the high school level, and Diana George, who taped and responded to over 100 peer group sessions of inexperienced writers at the college level, concurs with Whitworth. She maintains that the instructor must constantly circulate, "looking for an opportunity to enter a session" (325), though restraining from simply lecturing on a small scale rather than on a large one.

In their guide to student writing groups, Connie J. Hale and Susan Wyche-Smith recommend several roles for teachers, each progressively more involved. For example, teachers can stay on the sidelines, listening enough to make sure each group is on task or they can wait for the students to request help. For more direct involvement, teachers can be a rotating

member of each group in class or they may enter into peer discussions to serve as a mediator (Hale, Wyche-Smith 9).

Mediation, however, doesn't mean forcing the group to a consensus. As stated in chapter one, Bruffee maintains that groups should occasionally have a lack of consensus, a challenge to the majority thinking, which he dubs "abnormal discourse" (Bruffee 648). He sees this kind of discourse as the creative process at work, and necessary to learning.

But what is abnormal? When is it good and when is it considered in the perjorative sense? Collaborative learning can sometimes be a fine line between abnormal discourse and off-task discourse. Sarah Warshauer Freedman examined how two classes of ninth graders interact during peer response compositional activities and attempted to characterize response group talk. The study revealed that overall, about 60 percent of the productive talk stemmed from the written response guides and 40 percent was prompted by the content of the writing. But interestingly, of that 60 percent, two thirds of the talk was of some kind of resistance to the guides rather than adherence to their directions! Freedman also reported another problem: Students generally "avoided negative evaluation and helped one another complete the sheets just to get the work done" (71). This is an example of the paraphrased version of the Golden Rule: "don't criticize others if you don't want them to do it to you."According to her data, one of the classes spent 17 percent of its productive time avoiding negative evaluation (Freedman 91). These findings substantiate the experience of many junior and senior high school teachers, who've seen time and time again how students will, if allowed, spend more time arguing against an assignment than doing it. Of more significance is Freedman's finding that discussions of content were much higher in those classes where the peer response guidelines specifically included it. Another interesting note was the percentage of spontaneous talk about form and mechanics: students in one class did it 11 percent of the productive time and students in another did it for 14 percent of the time (Freedman 91). Do students discuss grammar without prompting? Her students apparently did, though one would think that most teachers would say that purely spontaneous reactions are almost always content-oriented.

Practically speaking, how *do* reader response groups affect the writing in a classroom? According to the writers of an often-cited study on the effects of collaborative writing techniques on college freshmen, not that much is known on the subject: "collaboration has been recommended, attacked and defended, but rarely has it been seriously studied..." (Louth, Carole McAllister, Hunter A. McAllister). This trio does report, however, that the benefits of group work may be more affective than academic. Comparisons of groups of students who worked independently with those that worked in groups showed no statistical significant difference between them, they said. They added, however, "attitude measures showed that subjects in the collaborative conditions were significantly more pleased with their writing than were subjects who worked independently" (Louth, Carole McAllister, Hunter A. McAllister 215). The attitudes toward writing and the writing process were measured using attitude surveys and a composite score of three attitude scales. According to the study, the attitude difference translated into more enjoyment, higher confidence and a greater belief in the writing course for those collaborative students. They conclude that "using collaborative techniques is extremely beneficial, all else being equal, if for no other reason than to produce a positive effect on students' attitude, enough perhaps for students to elect another writing course and approach it with confidence" (Louth, Carole McAllister, Hunter A. McAllister 221).

It is the affective side of peer response that often receives the most praise. But what about the academic side? Do the papers read better? Are they better compositions that have higher grades because of it? Because grades are relative to the teacher, most research in this area is practitioner oriented. And teachers have reported academic improvement. For example, Judy A. Hughes reports in the English Journal that in regard to the specific act of showing-not-telling, "the rewrites that I received were dramatically improved"(42). In an attempt to shed more light on this matter, chapter three's ethnographic study of peer response groups will contain information about the amount of change and improvement from one draft to the next.

Though teachers report both affective and academic rewards, they also report problems. For example, according to many practitioner articles,

"gossip sessions" can be a major problem with peer response groups. And editors of the English Journal wrote in the preface to their forum on peer groups, "what looks neat and simple in someone else's classroom has a devilish way of turning messy and complicated the first time we import it into our own (19).

In Bruffee's closing argument to his often-quoted "Conversations", he too recognizes the pitfalls that lie in the path of collaborative learning in the public classroom:

> Organizing collaborative learning effectively requires doing more than throwing students together with their peers with little or no guidance or preparation. To do that is merely to perpetuate , perhaps even aggravate the many possible negative efforts of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality. ("Conversations" 652)

In another later article he also acknowledges that discovering "the practical implications of the view that knowledge is a collaborative artifact will not be easy" ("Liberal" 103).

One of the problems encountered by college instructor/researcher Wilson Currin Snipes, as part of his department's inquiry into peer response groups in 1971, was that some students had the discipline to complete tasks in a group setting and others did not. Twenty years later Louth, McAllister and McAllister reported the phenomenon in their study as "social loafing" (221), also known as "the hitchhiker" (Morton 36). The cause, according to Snipes, is two-fold: (1) "the educational system is so overpowering that students are conditioned to become passive recipients of learning" and (2) "a loss of identity; the student is role-playing at learning; he has separated the classroom from the valuable parts of his life" (172). All this boils down to the often-heard, "so-in-so can't accept responsibility for his actions!" and the question is whether this can be taught at all. Perhaps it's part of the maturation process that varies so greatly from one individual to the next. Snipes recommends, among other things, letting students have a "voice" in their grades, requiring that poor themes be rewritten, and having students evaluate fewer papers (173). But solutions for student apathy are difficult to come up with, and Snipes concludes, "the inquiry into peer group teaching yields mixed reviews, both solvable and unsolvable dilemmas..." (Snipes 174).

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Student apathy, or lack of motivation may be traced to any number of things, and in Diana George's previously mentioned mid-eighties study of 100 peer group sessions, she attempts to find what separates the motivated groups from the not-so motivated ones. She reports that inexperienced college writers typically form three kinds of groups: task-oriented; leaderless; and dysfunctional (George 321). One of the most serious failings of all the groups, including the task-oriented ones, was that "much of what was said during a session was lost, left in the classroom the minute the class ended," and that the "critique sheets rarely recorded more than the vague `It sounds ok to us' or `it needs more development.' "(George 322). One solution, it's suggested, is to have the students bring questions about their own papers to the peer session, with the hope that the student would retain more if it was something they wished to know.

The leaderless and dysfunctional groups both shared several problems, according to her study. Writers in these groups, although they may have had a profitable talk, did not pick up on the helpful comments, the remarks did not change the subsequent draft. These groups also were easily distracted by the topics covered in the essays: "a group can easily fall into a rather long and lively discussion of the idea and then be fooled into believing that they actually discussed the essay at hand" (George 322). She also states that both groups did not appear to see the value of peer response, and wanted the instructor to tell them what should be done with the paper under discussion. To mitigate these problems, George recommends that student writers "talk through" the paper before or after they read it to the group, summarizing the essay and telling which parts were difficult or easy. Also, all group members would have a photocopy of the essay at hand, to help confine them to the actual text rather than embarking on tangential conversations.

George strongly believes in the idea of modeling how to act in a group, both to the class as a whole and as a circulating member of the groups in action. A more recent study of writing and thinking across the curriculum at the college level concluded that "peer response could be helpful or unhelpful, depending upon whether the peers actually knew enough to help each other" (McCarthy, Walvoord 239). This would emphasize what

many already advocate: that teachers must instruct the students on how to interact in a peer response group, as well as how to write their papers.

A brief survey of recently published articles by practitioners and researchers reveals that they often repeat each other: the problems already stated here usually have been often addressed many times before. One can add to the already stated problems with peer response groups the following: responses are too similar; the group isn't compatible; the responses don't improve with time; the responses are too harsh; the classroom is too small for noisy readings and self-assured writers resent advice from others.

With so many variables to the chemistry of each teacher, school, class, group and individual student, it stands to reason that peer response is a problematic device and that these problems will seem to be unsolvable dilemmas, to use Snipes' words. And this is why Ronald Barron cautions teachers to not expect too much: "teachers need to tolerate some partial failures even though they may have worked extensively with individuals trying to improve their performance" (Barron 33).

Peer response may be an imperfect classroom activity, partly because the interaction of human beings is difficult to assure optimum production at all times, but partly because we still don't know all there is to know about it. Both Freedman and Louth, McAllister and McAllister end their studies with the latter conclusion. Freedman says, "this study shows how much we still have to learn if teachers are to provide classroom environments that are maximally supportive of peers talking and learning together" (Freedman 105). Louth, McAllister and McAllister are more specific about future studies: there is "the need for more qualitative research, either ethnographic or case study...to explore what occurs in these writing groups. Such exploration could lead to new and finer definitions of the collaborative process and its components" (Louth, Carole McAllister, Hunter A. McAllister 222).

Their conclusions provide a segue into Chapter 3 of this thesis, which is a report of an ethnographic study of peer response groups conducted in my ninth and eleventh grade classes.

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Chapter 3
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY
PART ONE -
RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DESIGN OF STUDY

A graduate school colleague of mine, aware of my thesis topic, handed me a copy of a student's paper she had been involved with as an intern for an English 495 class. The "argument" paper, which received an `A' , concluded that peer groups didn't work in the writing classroom. Drawing on his experiences in such groups since Freshman English, the writer said he just didn't find the time spent to be worth the results: "one early lesson on peer evaluations was that sometimes they should not be taken too seriously" (Harris 2). In fact, the writer's most successful experience in a composition peer activity was when he tutored another student outside of class, assisting from the brainstorming stage through the final draft.

This is true, of course. One of the outcomes of evaluative responses in a peer response group. But the student writer also saw group reluctance to assume authority over another student's writing, and to say something that would hurt anyone's feelings. In the end, the writer states that many others feel as he does about working in groups. He is frankly puzzled as to why virtually every instructor he's had believes in the value of peer groups. But he acknowledges that he hadn't "observed peer evaluation as a teacher would" (Harris 6).

Harris is implying that teachers may have a hidden agenda which the students may not understand that justifies the use of groups. This isn't really true, based on the views expressed by practitioners in the English Journal. Most teachers just simply feel that peer response is valuable despite the flaws. This doesn't necessarily mean an acceptance of the flaws, however. Those teachers that have the time and inclination become teacher-researchers, seeking to learn more about the process of composition. According to Joe Belanger, reporting in the English Journal, "classroom teachers are in the best

position to solve many of the complex problems of education, and what is new is the recent acceptance of classroom observation (case studies for example) as legitimate research" (Belanger 16).

Solving problems of any complexity is a big task, this endorsement notwithstanding, and it's seldom done by one person. Sometimes researchers just add to the pile of information, rather than providing the solution, and this is particularly the case with those who engage in ethnographic studies. The notion of such studies is closely tied to philosopher and theoretician Clifford Geertz, who explains that "an ethnographic account does not rest on its author's ability to capture primitive facts in faraway places and carry them home like a mask or a carving, but on the degree to which he is able to clarify what goes on in such places, to reduce puzzlement - what manner of men are these" (16)?

The study conducted as part of this thesis was instigated, if for no other reason, than to reduce that Cal State San Bernardino student writer's puzzlement over the use of an activity that can pose problems in some situations and work quite well in others. The primary aim of my ethnographic study is to add to the picture that researchers are developing of the process of peer response; in other words, to follow the suggestion of Louth et al. at the conclusion of chapter two, to "explore what occurs" in peer response groups.

This attempt to tell what manner of discussion goes on in peer response groups can be broken down into two steps: collecting data and interpreting it. My method of collecting data was influenced by Geertz and others after him who use what he terms a "thick description" of the subject, and particularly by the ideas found in the often-cited article by Kenneth S. Cantor, Dan R. Kirby and Judith P. Goetz, "Research in Context: Ethnographic Studies in English Education." My method of interpreting my observations borrows from Stephen Wilson, who argues that "well-executed ethnographic research uses a technique of disciplined subjectivity that is as thorough and intrinsically objective as are other kinds of research" (Wilson 258).

My observations of the response groups were composed of written notes containing concrete detailed description of what occurred, recorded

interviews, unobtrusive recordings of the activity using a microcassette tape recorder, questionnaires, student peer response sheets and all the drafts of the students' papers. The goal of my data collection was to compile a thick description, and ethnographic methodologist Gail McCutcheon provides a good classroom example when she examines the act of students nodding. She states that the straightforward physical description of their head movement is a "thin" description until the observer adds what the act "signified to them" (McCutcheon 7). The observer will ask what the nodding means, which can be many different things for each student, from boredom to attentiveness (Kantor, et. al. 297). It's for this reason that a common element of nearly all ethnographic inquiries is the researcher's role: "Implicit in the ideas of hypothetical thinking...is the notion of researcher as participant, as one whose personal and even subjective judgments are not only permitted, but essential to the research enterprise" (Kantor, et. al.).

But the data gathering isn't only accomplished as a subjective observer-participant immersed in the peer response process. According to Wilson, ethnographic techniques aren't exclusively subjective; they can possess a kind of objectivity by "systematically seeking to understand actions from the different perspectives" (Wilson 259). For example, an observer studying the interaction of students involved in a fight would attempt to understand the fight from the multiple perspectives of the teacher, the students involved and bystander students. This method of recognizing varied points of view, checking personal, subjective judgments against other such judgments, is a corroborative procedure called triangulation. "Researchers looking at composition teaching, for example, might check their interpretations of field notes against statements made by teachers or students, features of writings produced by students, and/or teacher's written lesson plans" (Kantor, et. al. 298). Therefore, though the ethnographic interpretation of the data does allow for the researcher's personal insights, it also requires that those insights be verified by other evidence and perspectives. In my study of peer response activities in my classroom, my observations are cross-checked in four ways: by the answers provided by the students in questionnaires asking them to tell their feelings about the session I witnessed; by the peer response guides they fill out themselves; by the revisions done to the text of their papers

subsequent to the peer response session, and by their answers to my post-session questioning.

Some explanation is also needed of my collection methods, and of the limitations of these methods. While the students were engaged in peer response, my main method of observation was to take field notes, which were augmented to a small degree by recordings using a microcassette recorder. The recordings were of poor quality because of the quality of the equipment as well as all the ambient noise in the room. Furthermore, they only captured the content of the verbal interaction, missing the nonverbal behavior. The presence of the recorder, although unobtrusive, also affected the students' behavior. For example, I was able to obtain more accurate accounts of the patterns of action and nonaction from my field notes, because the students' knowledge that they were being taped generally worked to keep them on task. Also, even though I used two tape recorders throughout the year, both malfunctioned at times, usually due to my constant popping in and out of record mode. In the end, due to all these reasons, I relied far more heavily on my field notes than the recordings.

My data collection is also limited by my own limitations as a teacher-researcher. A classroom is not a laboratory, where the environment serves the experiment, and where conditions may be controlled. For example, I couldn't devote all my time to my research groups; I had to pursue my objectives as a teacher of all the students in my class, not just those involved in the study. As a result, my field observations do not cover all the assignments worked on during the study, nor take in all the interactions of a specific peer response group. There was a certain degree of hit-and-miss involved. And this, in turn, affected some of the verification later on when interpreting the data, because I would occasionally find a particularly intriguing revision on a student's paper that unfortunately took place following a peer response session that I hadn't observed. This is one reason why I selected groups from different classes, so that I would not be faced with trying to observe two groups at the same time. Nonetheless, my time in class as a researcher competed with my time as a teacher, creating gaps in my data that sometimes made cross-checking and verification difficult.

Lastly, my method of description of students' behavior was initially

troubling because I felt that it needed to be codified to make it more objective, and so that anyone who learned the coding scheme could interpret the behaviors in approximately the same way, but I also felt that such a scheme might be cumbersome to develop and utilize in the classroom, and so extensive as to distort what actually went on. In other words, it would render an activity into a checklist that would be less accurate in the end, than my own subjective, hand-written reports of what occurred. To my relief, I found that Stephen Wilson had addressed that problem, and I employed his ideas as a model for ethnographic technique. Wilson believes that an ethnographer must be wary of becoming too much like "the objective social scientist, (who) in standardizing the interpretation, may have destroyed some of the most valuable data he or she had" (Wilson 250). That missing data, he says, lies in the context in which it took place. "To know merely the fact that feelings, thoughts, or actions exist is not enough without also knowing the framework within which these behaviors fit" (Wilson 250). Again, the interpretation of the subjects by the participant-observer is of primary importance in an ethnographic study, and in fact, is what distinguishes thin description from thick description. For these reasons, I decided against the use of a derived scheme to code behaviors as part of my field notes.

In summary, the ethnographic study I conducted was systematic in its selection of data, used various methods to gather information, and attempted verification via triangulation methods that corroborate observations with other perspectives. The goal of the study is to contribute to a better understanding of the peer response process.

PART TWO -
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF FOUR HIGH SCHOOL
PEER RESPONSE GROUPS

Context is critical in ethnographic studies. I'll proceed from the outside to the inside, that is, move from the conditions that exist outside the students to those that exist inside the group and inside the students themselves. My observations and interpretations will be followed by the results of my attempt to verify my observations through triangulation.

I begin this "thick description" with a brief description of the overall function of peer response groups in my classroom, how this fits into the theories and methods stated in chapters one and two, and how I teach writing as a process. These things are part of the context in which peer response groups work, particularly in respect to placing the activity within a pedagogical scheme.

In my classroom, peer response groups are usually composed of no more than three students. I follow this policy for two reasons: it takes time for everyone in the group to read all the papers written by group members, and the larger the group the more time it takes; secondly, three-student groups makes it harder for students to have conversations on the side while discussions between the writer and a responder are going on, because there's no one else to talk to within the group. As a teacher, I find that having ten groups in a room is no different than having seven, although it is a bit more difficult to establish enough buffer space among the groups. For this reason, students are allowed to occupy any part of the room they wish.

During the school year in which the study took place, the peer response format was always the same, though the instructions on the peer response guides would vary from assignment to assignment. Students would bring the second draft of their paper in a form that was rough but could be read by others, and each student in the group would exchange with the other two. They read the paper once through silently, then would fill out the peer

response guide. The guide, designed by me, always contained both reader based and criterion questions. They would exchange and go through the silent reading once again. After all members had their papers and accompanying peer response sheets returned, the sheets would be read aloud by the writer, and followed by a discussion in which the writer jotted down any particularly useful comments or thoughts on their draft. The students were trained to give positive feedback during this discussion period - any evaluative remarks were confined to the peer response sheets. The training was done at the beginning of the school year, and basically took the form of modeling. I would place an anonymous student paper from the previous year on an overhead projector, and, using a sample peer response sheet as a guide, would demonstrate how I wanted them to follow the instructions. We also had some mock group sessions in which I tried to demonstrate on-task and off-task conversations, as well as the use of diplomacy and courtesy when dealing with another student's composition. Normally the students would be given a full period (55 minutes) to engage in peer response. If the group felt they were running out of time, they would be allowed to skip the reading aloud portion of the activity, but it was stressed that they must engage in discussion of each paper.

As established in chapter two, there are many versions of group work in composition classes that go by the name of peer response. With its combination of evaluation and non-judgmental feedback and inclusion of mandatory discussion, my version looks to Bruffee and Vygotsky for theoretical support. My response groups follow a format prescribed by me, and although Bruffee allows for teacher-designed response within his "conversation," my method is probably not as free as Bruffee's followers would like. Peter Elbow's model of peer response, for example, eschews teacher intervention entirely, and is not a source of inspiration for me. As reported in chapter two, most peer response guides used today contain some element of evaluation, although very few employ "error hunts." My own guidelines, which contain both reader based and criterion responses, will be detailed later and resemble quite closely the example of Edgar Thompson's guide in chapter 2. Although I normally circulate the room with the principle intention of keeping my students conversations on task, for the

purpose of this study and to follow the ethnographer's role of participant-observer, I broke from my routine to become more directly involved in the peer groups. For example, I would question them, take notes and make recordings.

Like most high school teachers, I teach writing as a process, in a series of steps. During the 1993-94 school year, my students began by (1) brainstorming as a class activity, and then (2) wrote a rough draft that was followed by (3) class discussion that repeated the objectives of the assignment. These objectives were given to them on a handout when they were initially assigned the composition.They then (4) wrote a second draft, which is called the edit draft, (5) engaged in peer response, and (6) followed that up with a publication draft, or final draft, that was graded and commented upon by me. At this point students had the option to (7) revise the publication draft for a new grade, and were required to revise two publication drafts per semester. Students could also earn extra credit by (8) volunteering to read their paper aloud.

The purpose of this study is to examine what goes on in peer response groups, and will contain its focus to that step, as well as examine the text of papers completed for steps four and six.

The Participants

Ethnographic methodology pivots on the presence of the participant-observer because the primary emphasis on the study is on the observer's reports. Part of the description of peer response then, must necessarily include some background information on my role in the class. My part in the setting was as teacher-researcher, and I strongly feel, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, that there is a need to learn more about the peer response process in hopes of reducing the puzzlement that exists regarding the effectiveness of peer response groups. Many quantitative studies have been conducted, but such research, in my opinion, needs to be augmented by qualitative studies, and these kind of studies are particularly suited to giving practitioners like myself a chance to contribute to the body of knowledge. At 45-years-old, I am a relatively new, but seasoned, teacher with five years experience, one at the junior high and four at the high school level. My previous career was as a newspaper reporter and editor for 15 years, during

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which time I taught journalism at the junior college level. Stephen M. North states that "ethnographic inquiry produces stories, fictions" (North 277). It's hoped that my writing background further qualifies me for that task.

I'm quite active within my school: I inaugurated the Honors English program at the 9th grade level, brought the journalism program (school paper) from the auspices of the RSP program to the department of English where it belongs, and proposed a creative writing class that has been approved and filled for the upcoming year. More importantly, for the purposes of this study, I seem to be perceived by the students as a flexible, accesible teacher who is easy to talk to and open to student ideas.

Continuing to move from the outside inward in describing the peer response process in my classes, I proceed to an overview of the students participating in the study. There were six ninth grade Honors English students and six eleventh grade English students enrolled at Serrano High School in the school year of 1993-94. The students, nine girls and three boys, were selected on the basis of cooperation and commitment to the writing process, and were therefore some of the more successful students. The final grades of the students were two C's, seven B's and three A's. This configuration of students, neither random nor representative of the whole, is fine for ethnographic studies. The fact that the students are all successful won't skew the study, because the group's composition is only relevant to the exact context in which the study takes place. As North points out, an ethnographic study can't be used to lead to generalizations because "the social discourse that is the primary object of Ethnographic inquiry represents a one-time, unrecoverable phenomenom" (North 310). In fact, he makes it clear that "things can never come to mean in quite the same way twice" (North 310). What I did gain from the selection of these fairly successful students was their willingness to talk, which was essential to gathering information, and to the process of peer response itself.

The income level of the families of the student participants is unknown, although a rough gauge could be provided by their parents' occupations, which are known. Eleven of the parents were professionals, seven were blue collar (non-management) workers and six were housewives.

The students initially teamed up by themselves, and so could the response

groups could be considered friendship-generated.

The Setting

The study took place during a six-month period in the latter half of the 1993-94 school year at Serrano High School. Serrano has 9th through 12th grades, and is the only high school of the Snowline School District, which encompasses a geographical area that includes desert, foothills and mountain communities. The school has a student population of 1,350 that over the past five years has been expanding at the rate of over 100 students a year. The school draws most of its students from the foothill communities, but the town of Wrightwood in the mountains, with a population of 3,500, contributes significantly; Wrightwood is a commuter suburb for professional workers from Los Angeles to the high desert. Consequently, the students from these families usually have computers and a small resource library at home. The foothill communities are loosely zoned and many of the families like privacy and open space to raise animals. The 4-H program at Serrano has remained popular despite a change in recent years from rural dwellers to rural-suburban dwellers who forgo the animals for ATC's. Some of the poorest families in the district live in the foothills, sometimes in motorhomes without bathroom plumbing.

Serrano High School did very well compared to the rest of the county in the CLAS tests for 1992, which were released in 1993. The school placed an overall second in performance, and the English scores were all above average. The school is evenly divided between vocational and scholastic studies, although the most recent developments (such as a growing emphasis on passing the Advanced Placement Test and the construction of a computer technology center) have favored the college-bound students.

The school is located in the largest of the foothill communities, the unincorporated town of Phelan. It's an area of rapid growth, even in the current sluggish California economy, which is why our school district has construction funds when many districts are without funds at all. The school is in the midst of a massive expansion project that will give the high school a new science wing, performing arts center and doubled gymnasium by the end of 1995.

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There is no industry in Phelan, other than the service industry, and residents commute to the high desert cities of nearby Hesperia or Victorville, or "down the hill" to the Inland Empire and further.

All in all, the foothill communities are undergoing the change: from dwellers who were drawn to the wide open spaces to get away from it all, independent desert rats with junk cars and corrugated tin roofs on their ramshackle homes to a bedroom community for young families buying their first home.

Peer Response Groups in Action

The four groups, two ninth grade Honors English and two eleventh grade English, were observed over a six-month period. The response sessions that I observed and participated in involved the following five assignments: state a problem and solution; relate a significant autobiographical incident; argue a position; do a literature analysis; and write a short story. These are all typical high school writing assignments, with word length usually 300 to 500 words. They also correspond to the "writing domains" that are tested by CLAS tests.

Group A

Russell, Arriana and Jennifer are eleventh graders in an afternoon class. Russell, 17, is a first-string quarterback on the football team, a good student - real sports scholarship material for a small college - who has a problem with taking life too seriously, a trait not uncommon in a teenager. Russell's plans to become a major league baseball player, and if that falls through, would like to have a career in the medical field. His father is a superintendent at a steel mill and his mother is a campus monitor at an elementary school. Russell doesn't read or write anything for fun. The drawback to peer response, he says, is "if you have a screwball read your work it will be a waste of time."

He doesn't have to worry about that with his two partners, who write quite well and on occasion can be a little precocious. Arriana, 16, is considering a career in cultural studies, psychology or plastic surgery. Her father is a wastewater management executive and her mother is a housewife. She says she finds school boring at times. "I like it when teachers get excited about the

assignment...instead of saying, in this monotone, `here it is. It's worth X points.' They make it look zestier, sexier instead of that boring old Jane and Fred." For Arriana, peer response groups have a built-in problem: "A Big one! The person who read or responded, whatever, was just too nice so nothing was accomplished."

Jennifer,16, puts out her own alternative music magazine, writes poetry and short stories, reads a half-dozen books over the summer and is one of the better writers in the eleventh grade. Her father is attending nursing school and her mother is a Registered Nurse, seeking a BSN degree. Her career goal is to work in the journalism field or as an environmental engineer. She agrees with Arriana about the value of peer response in general. It doesn't always work well because "sometimes they aren't honest...they don't want to hurt your feelings."

When these three students form their group, they usually like to leave the seats in rows, and seat themselves one in front of the other, with Russell sitting in the back. As they take out their papers - the assignment was to relate an autobiographical incident in which they showed some kind of courage (We're reading <u>Red Badge Of Courage</u>) - the two girls are laughing about some personal courageous incident of Jennifer's that is apparently too risque for the purposes of this essay. It won't be hard to guess Russell's topic: it's guaranteed that he has written about his exploits in either baseball or football. The girls are in a gabby mood and would probably like to continue talking but my observational gaze gets them down to business. Russell has Arriana's paper and is amazed by Arriana's verbage. "Mine? Wait'll you get Jennifer's!" she says, waving Jennifer's five-page paper. They are soon intently reading each other's essay...they've been told not to write anything on the peer response sheet until they've read the paper once through, but Jennifer likes to jot down things as she goes along. Occasionally remarks are made, some "ooh's and ahhh's" about one thing or another, and it strikes me that I should have copies of their work and be able to read what they're reading.

The peer response guide for this particular assignment is a two-parter: the first two questions are brought into the session by the writer of the paper, who asks the responder to look at certain elements of the paper that the writer happens to be concerned about; and the second part is composed of

five questions supplied by me. The following were my questions for this assignment:

Autobiographical Incident Response Guide

(1) What was the most interesting part of the paper? Why?
(2) Does the opening paragraph try to catch the reader's attention? Why? Is there another part of the paper that might make a better opening paragraph?
(3) What was the most detailed part of the paper?
(4) Did you relate to the writer's incident? How?
(5) Scan the paper and underline where:
      (a) there are too many sentences in a row of a similar length.
      (b) the same words are used over again.

It takes them about 25 minutes, so now there's only 20 minutes left in the period, to accomplish the filling out of the response sheet and the discussion.

The idea is to talk roughly the same length of time about each paper, but this group's discussion typically starts out methodical and then quickly degenerates into talking about the most interesting paper of the three. Even though they profess not to like a responder to be too nice, this is, in fact, one way of avoiding any negative comments. They give the impression that it's much more fun to respond and relate to the ideas (primarily) and the writing (secondarily).

I remind them that time is short and that they should try to talk about everyone's paper. As I've stated, all my students have been trained, via modeling of sample papers, how to carry on a discussion.There are no guidelines for discussion other than to speak about the paper itself, and the emotions the paper generated. They've been told to review the response sheet when the discussion bogs down. For example, the first question on the response sheet for this assignment, which asks them to identify the most interesting part of the paper, is one quite common to all assignments, and they've been instructed that conversations not specifically about the paper at hand should be kept to a minimum. They've been told that if the essay

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mentions surfing, there's no need to talk about their own surfing experiences - what's important how and what the composition says. Saying too much and going off on tangents can be a problem, but so can saying too little. There are always some groups that manage to accomplish the entire peer response assignment in fifteen minutes. To discourage this, they've been told to ask the person talking to explain why they believe the way they do about the paper. "Tell why!" is a repeated dictum to my students, both as responders and as writers.

They decide to discuss Jennifer's first. This is not an idle suggestion. Of the three essays, it is the most thought-provoking: Jennifer has written about a time when she was with three girls who were getting high on marijuana and she refused to indulge. As I stated, they rate content much higher than writing style. Russel moves his chair out into the aisle so that he can have eye-contact with Arriana in the seat up front.

Arriana: I got the feeling reading your paper...you really made them feel stupid for doing drugs, but they didn't want to let it show.

Jennifer: Yeah. I wanted to get out of there, but I was with them, so we were all sitting around and I wasn't doing any...it was weird.

Russell: If it was a bunch of guys, they'd be calling you all sorts of names. There'd be a lot more pressure and -

Arriana: That's because guys are dumb.

Russell: She'd probably have to walk home, they'd leave her there.

Jennifer: It was funny. They were telling me how it was great that I didn't give in to peer pressure, but they kept smoking.

Arriana: Yeah, I liked that part. You had a lot of good details. You should have put more details in the beginning, I think, it needed some more details in the beginning but the end was great.

Russell: I liked the beginning because everything is described as going great and she's real comfortable and everything changes when her friends pull out the pot.

Arriana: I liked how you described feeling like a "fugative" when you were trying to find a place to get high.

Jennifer: (Laughing) That's how it was.

Arriana: I understood everything except when you said how they used a

	can for smoking pot, you need to explain that.
Jennifer:	Uh-huh.
Arriana:	And when you talk about them jumping out the window, you need to put more details there, that could be a little better.
Jennifer:	Yeah. I didn't know how to describe that...if that should be a bigger part of the beginning. I sort of wanted to get on to the next part, I didn't want to make it too long.
Arriana:	Your story was good, it wasn't too long. I really liked it.
Russell:	Oh yeah, it was great. I liked it too.

Throughout the five sessions that I observed of this group, the girls typically dominated the discussions. Even though Russell wrote well and carefully, he never showed much interest in talking about writing. Arriana and Jennifer were the ones to actually refer to specific words and phrases, to get close to the text itself. Russel's comments were little trifles, echoes of something somebody else had said, remarks that had little influence on what was being said, mainly side-comments about the content and ideas expressed in the writing rather than the way it was written; he was obviously less confident about analyzing style.

And despite the considerable creative talent of the group as a whole, they seldom made suggestions about the kind of details, for example, that could be added. There was a laziness to their responding. This is also true of the comments made on the peer response sheets, although with the papers right in front of the responders, the written remarks did tend to be more involved. Jennifer's written response to Arriana's paper (Arriana's autobiographical incident was about a valedictorian speech she gave in the eighth grade), for example, showed a little more depth:

> Maybe you should shorten a little bit of the part where you're doing the speech, just use more specific details. You tend to sound monotonous where you start to `mess up' in your speech. Try to use another phrase, like `I lost track of what I was saying' or something. Also shorten the beginning with getting dressed a little. Use more specific details, instead of repeating yourself by using different wordings.

In talking with the group, I'd asked them, in light of the personal nature of

some writing assignments such as the autobiographical incident, if they ever felt uncomfortable having another student read their work. Jennifer replied, "I think people get uncomfortable because their writing is like part of themselves, and they don't want those other people to see that. I'm like that. I usually write more of what I feel if I know only the teacher will see it."

Arriana had a different take on the subject: "Some people feel uncomfortable because they have been constantly ragged on by their parents and they are afraid their peers will do the same...it just gives you low self esteem. I feel uncomfortable when it's a new class or when the paper is kind of personal, although if it's funny it's ok. Or if eighty percent of the class isn't too bright I don't feel comfortable."

Russell saw it in simpler terms: "People get uncomfortable because they're afraid the person won't agree with what they say or think it's stupid. I don't really feel this way...I don't care."

To a great degree, the students' perception of themselves naturally affects their participation in peer response. Russell, conditioned to not show fear on a ball field and often looked up to as a team leader, says he doesn't care about what people think, whereas Arriana's only uncomfortable around students who see her as a school girl, as a nerd. Jennifer tends to be a bookish, private person, and prefers to write to the teacher as her audience.

Overall, Group A often appears to be a productive group that follows the instructions on the peer response sheet very well. On the surface, then, they take care of business. But I always had the feeling that underlying their efforts was the attitude that they were going through the motions as good students, that they felt that it would be too much effort to truly re-work the papers. And they never took a chance at really alienating each other by insisting that a paper needed any major revisions. All in all, they were too content with the material at hand.

Group B

Rachael, Paul and Kristi are ninth grade Honors English students in a second-period morning class. Rachael, 15, enjoys science and math and plans to become an oceanographer. English is far from her favorite subject, and she's enrolled in Honors English only because her parents want her to take

honors classes. She can be a little obstinate at times, and when pressed to decide what paper of hers she likes best, she always says, "the one the teacher likes." Typically, she declined to reveal the occupation of her parents. Although she reads well, she says she "hates" reading and never writes for the fun of it. She acknowledges that peer response groups in composition can be useful because "another student can see flaws in your paper that you don't see," but she often doesn't trust the responder: "They may not care and they're just doing it because they have to, so they just read it and say it's perfect."

Kristi, 15, is a very bright, quiet student who would like to become a doctor. Her parents are both involved in odd jobs: her father and mother both work at the local ski lodge in the winter and in the summer her father is in the cement business while her mother earns money working as a mountain camp cook and "cake decorator." Although she often has the right answers, she seldom volunteers during class discussion. She is the kind of student that takes notes while she reads literature, to help her remember details of the story, and she reads a book every two or three weeks during the summer. She believes that peer response groups are useful because she says she has "a hard time putting sentences so that they make sense and aren't repeated," but admits that sometimes she doesn't like response sessions because the responder may "make changes that you didn't want."

The third member of the group, Paul, 15, is a small, frail boy.He is the son of an architect and nurse, would like to be a pharmacist, and has an obsession with good grades and aims to be the class valedictorian. He constantly frets over small errors and exhibits high anxiety when given a major assignment. He is often teased about this behavior by his teachers and other students. He doesn't do any recreational writing, but is an avid reader, reading up to a half-dozen books over the summer. When asked to list both the benefits and drawbacks of his prior experience with peer response, Paul says, "When the writer reads their own paper everything is clear and logical but another student may read the same paper and not feel the same way. But sometimes they find problems, which is good, but they often don't explain how to fix them."

When they form their response group, these three students like to sit on

the floor down in a corner of the room, as far away as possible from the noise of the other groups. Paul can't find his essay at first, which causes him great consternation, much to the delight of the two girls, who begin to tease him about it. There is shuffling of papers, drawing my attention and bringing me over...which only further agitates him, naturally. I take part in the conspiracy and question him in a mock-serious voice. Paul finds his paper and the three exchange. The assignment is an interpretation paper, requiring the student to take a position on some aspect of either of two novels they'd read, <u>To Kill A Mockingbird</u>, and <u>Great Expectations,</u> and support it via quotations from the book. They read silently, saying nothing to each other except to inquire about the spelling of a word, knowing that I want them to read the paper from start to finish first, without stopping to discuss it. Rachael makes a note or two on Paul's paper as she reads.

Interpretation Paper Response Guide
(1) If you had to change one part of the paper
    (a) which part would it be?
    (b) how would you change it?
    (c) why would you change it?
(2) Good writing always has a main idea (expressed in the thesis statement) that is referred to throughout the paper. Underline the paper's main idea, read the rest of the paper again while answering the following:
    (a) how many times was the main idea of the paper referred to?
    (b) did this paper ever go to far off-track, from the main idea?
(3) Put a check in the margin where you find a specific example or quote from the book that is evidence of what the writer is saying.
(4) Circle the areas that you think might be errors in spelling, punctutation, grammar. You don't have to be positive that it's wrong, the circled words just tell the writer that they need to check it themselves.
(5) What was the most interesting thing that the writer said about

the book?

When they are done there's about 15 minutes left in the period. Paul praises Kristi's paper. She said the same ideas as he did, but it sounded so much better than his, he tells her. Kristi says that she thinks it's her best paper and I ask her why. "I spent a really long time writing the rough draft," she explains, "I kept stopping because I didn't know what to say. I had to look at the assignment sheet over and over." There's a silence and the discussion can't quite get going beyond how great Kristi's paper is. Unlike the autobiographical essay assignment, where each paper is different in content, this assignment involves readings common to everyone, and possibly similar ideas. If there's an element of competition, however, it's not apparent. I ask them if reading somebody else's paper helped them understand their own paper better, and if there were any parts that their papers had in common with each other. The rationale for my questions a simple one: I wanted them to be able to learn from each other, and be able to see another perspective to accomplishing the same task.

Paul: Kristi did a good job putting the quotes in there. You can see
            how to do it when somebody else does it, but it's hard
            sometimes to do it yourself. I always want to...to just copy the
            whole sentence. Just put it on the paper. Kristi was good at
            attaching the quote to a sentence.

Rachael: I guess...it's all the same stuff. I mean, the papers were all alike
            because we all were doing the same assignment.

Kristi: You took a different book. You did Great Expectations. Paul
            and I did To Kill A Mockingbird.

Rachael: Yeah. But I mean, everyone just puts down ideas they heard in
            class. Everyone's got the same ideas, I think. It's so dumb.

Paul: Well it's how you say it, too.

Kristi: Yeah. Actually, I liked your conclusion a lot better than mine
            (referring to Rachael). You made it repeat the same idea in the
            first paragraph but it didn't sound like you were just copying it
            over. I never can do the conclusions because I'm all done...I
            don't have anything more to say. It's like, now what? I said

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everything. And so I just repeat whatever I said in the first paragraph.

Paul: I'm the same way. I don't have anything more to say in the conclusion.

Rachael: I just sum everything up. Isn't that a conclusion?

(They turn to me)

Me: Yes, it's one kind of a conclusion. What other problems did you have doing the paper?

Kristi: After I read their papers I thought that maybe I did go off the main idea...I think everybody had that problem a little bit. It's hard to not talk about other things that are in the book.

Paul: I think everybody had good quotes. I thought that was going to a real hard part, but it wasn't hard at all.

Rachael: That's what I mean. Everybody used the same quotes because those were the ones that we heard in class, that's why I think everybody has the same ideas.

(Paul turns to me)

Paul: Can you just say that the theme is "you can't tell a book by its cover" or do you have to explain what that means?

Me: You have to elaborate a little. You have to be more specific than that. When you say the theme you're being general, you're generalizing, but you have to add more, about how people are, not books.

Kristi: I think I need to change mine then.

Paul: Yeah, you kept saying that same thing, "you can't judge a book by its cover," over and over.

Rachael: Paul, hold up your paper for Mr. Buchta.

(He meekly does so)

Rachael: Doesn't he have too many paragraphs.

Me: It's hard to say without reading it. It does look kind of choppy.

Paul: That's because I type everything. It looks shorter than it really is.

Rachael: I think you did it because the requirements say a "multi-paragraph essay," but the way you did it...it belittles the entire paper.

Paul: Ex-cuse me.

Although this session isn't necessarily representative of the group, this seems to be a good example of the kind of conversation that Bruffee would appreciate. The students feel secure enough to challenge each other but don't descend into strictly negative evaluation of each other's papers. And the talk is closely focused on the assignment, although this was not necessairly the case in my other observations of this group, and is somewhat attributable to the nature of the assignment itself. An interpretation of literature, unlike an assignment where a student's memories are called into play, leaves little room for tangential excursions. So, the students here do maintain a conversation that stays within the realm of the act of writing, which is all Bruffee and a teacher could hope for. In fact, there is also a bit of what might be considered as an example of Bruffee's abnormal discourse: conversation that challenges authority and adds a little chaos and doubt to the mix. Rachael says that all the students seem to have the same ideas, recognizing that students will take the road most traveled, secure in the knowledge that it can't be totally wrong if the teacher already agreed with it in class. I call these "classroom cliches" because the information is something that is obvious, that has been hammered home so often that the students who uses this information aren't thinking for themselves, are actually dabbling in a form of cliche.

On the other hand, Rachael doesn't really offer any new possibilities with her observations. She often gives the air of someone who doesn't really believe in the system, who sees no value in peer response groups. It's a kind of a "why bother?" attitude that occasinally bogs down the group's productivity. There seems to be a fine line between advancing knowledge through questioning of the status quo and placing the act of writing and conversing in a defeatest, negative light. Accordingly, Rachael tends to play down any contribution she makes, such as when she deflects praise for her concluding paragraph by saying "I just sum everything up."

Rachael tends to feel most comfortable when being evaluative, and this is perhaps due to the fact that it is a role she's played out in peer response groups in middle school. Her aggressive nature isn't content with responding positively and constructively, although there is always room for

constructive criticism, despite my instructions to keep the conversation non-judgmental. As stated in the previous chapter, a non-judgmental remark is one that focuses on how the language and ideas affect the reader, and what seems to work best. More problematic is this groups tendancy, in other peer response sessions, to allow Rachael's remarks to steer the them away from from anything but superficial matters. Their conversation about the assignment often comes to a quick end, and they fill the time with small talk.

In an individual interview Paul stated that sometimes his group finds his papers "stupid or illogical" when he really doesn't see any problems. I found this interesting because nowhere in my notes is there any evidence of the girls criticizing his work in this manner, suggesting the possibilty that this is how he feels, that this is his overly self-conscious translation of their comments.

When Rachael was questioned individually about making comments in a peer response session, she replied, "I don't expect them to take my advice or whatever, I just say what I think." This disbelief in the value of her own role in the response process underlies a lot of her behavior, and affects the productivity of the group as a whole, athough sometimes "productivity" is a relative term and Bruffee would perhaps argue that everything within the realm of "conversation" is, in fact, productive.

Group C

Marcos, Wendy and Heather, eleventh graders, are the members of a somewhat unique group because all three had me as their language arts teacher when they were in the eighth grade, during the one year I spent at the middle school level in my district. They are all capable of high grades, enjoy my teaching style and feel very secure, which allows me to tease them a bit. They are a verbal group that can easily find a reason to laugh. All three mentioned letter-writing as their main form of recreational writing, although the two girls also like to write poetry, and they also read on their own.

Heather, 17, is a local beauty queen, plans to major in theater and minor in journalism when she attends college. Her mother is a housewife and her father is a fireman. Heather has a strong desire to succeed, and a willingness to write a paper over as many times as necessary to achieve a high grade. She's not a highly original thinker, but she is always careful to

follow the assignment to the letter. When asked if she usually takes her group's advice, she replied, "I usually think about it first. It's my option if I want to use their advice in my paper. Sometimes their advice can give me different ideas which will benefit my paper."

Marcos, 16, is thinking about becoming a teacher or a lawyer. His mother is a marketing consultant and his father owns his own rubber products business. When he was younger Marcos was a bit volatile and could be offended somewhat easily, but he's shedding these qualities as he matures. When he volunteers in class, which is often, it's done with a sense of humor and bravado that gives the class the signal that he's no teacher's pet, and his answers are sometimes designed to get a shocked response from the teacher. As a result, he can be counter-productive, but he knows me well enough to know where the line is drawn between providing a bit of humor and actually being disruptive and will often try to make up for any outbursts by subsequently making some intelligent contributions. Marcos frankly assesses peer response groups like this: "There are benefits from others reading my paper, such as mechanical errors, grammatical errors or if the paper just plain out sucks."

Wendy, 16, has impeccable penmanship, writes two to three times more than is required, and likes to please her teachers; Wendy will bail out a failing discussion, volunteer to read, try to answer the difficult question and volunteer to read her own work first. Her father does auto body work for a trucking company and her mother is a teacher's assistant. Her writing has a poetic, lyrical quality, full of well-described images and is quite metaphoric. She is also one of the best readers in my classes and I call on her whenever the class read-aloud sessions start to drag.

Wendy enjoys exchanging papers, has a sense of audience in her peers which therefore makes the process more enjoyable for her. When pressed to come up with a drawback to peer response, she says that "differences of opinion can sometimes be a problem." She's expressing one of the most common complaints, that students often ignore the composition and focus on the opinion being stated, particularly when reading each other's controversial issue essays.

This group always seats itself for optimum discussion, facing each other in

a tight circle of three desks. Despite my instructions to save their comments for the discussion period of the response session, Marcos is simply incapable of silently reading without making remarks, although they are nearly always of a pure reader-response nature, positive and engaged with the topic rather than in a critique of how it's being written. Both members of his group write well and he clearly enjoys reading their papers and being in their company, paricularly Wendy's. Over the course of the year, Wendy and Marcos, who sit next to each other in class, developed a close relationship. Although each one already has a boyfriend/girlfriend, the two are good friends, and there seem to be sparks between them that could be the beginnings of a romance. This is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, this leads to a lot of gossip and giggling when they should be discussing their papers, but on the other, Wendy wants to please the teacher and Marcos wants to please Wendy, which therefore results in Marcos doing things that please the teacher. High school teachers never underestimate the influence of romantic entanglements on classroom chemistry; it can change from day to day and a wise teacher doesn't challenge and mock those who are down in the dumps over love. In this case, however, this apparently budding romance has proven to be more productive than not. Marcos puts a lot of effort into his papers and takes delight in surprising Wendy with his own work; he's clearly writing for an audience of one.

(Individual interview)

Marcos: I hope you don't change the groups, I hate that. Teachers are always changing everything.

Me: I never said I would. I just want you to do less gossiping and more talking about your papers.

Marcos: Sometimes it seems like that, but most of the time we're really talking about stuff in the papers. We're just having so much fun, laughing and everything that it seems like we're not doing what you want...but you said that it was okay to talk about...to respond to whatever they write. We give each other ideas. And Wendy writes so well, so does Heather, that I get a lot of ideas how to improve my paper. And sometimes I help them, too.

Me: I hope you do. Everybody needs an editor, even writers like

	them.
Marcos:	Yeah. Like today I told Wendy that she talked too much about the problems and not enough about the solutions, like you said.

What Marcos says about group discussions that seem to be off-task is true. This is one of the inherent problems with allowing, and encouraging, a non-judgmental response to the material. Bruffee is correct about the value of conversation, but the conversation must obviously relate to the process of writing or thinking about the writing in some way. During the course of the five assignments that were monitored, this group carried on a discussion completely unrelated to the assignment up to fifty percent of the time. When criticized by me for this habit, they seemed not to really be convinced of the error of their ways. They defended themselves by saying that they felt they had gotten the "work" done nonetheless, and that sometimes they just didn't have anything to say other than what they wrote on the peer response sheets or already had said.

When this group did talk about some aspect of the writing they usually discussed favorite parts and why they were good, and when the discussion became evaluative, they would talk about general overall structural problems, like a dull opening paragraph, a lack of enough examples or a need to get more directly to the point. I was once called upon to arbitrate a disagreement on the latter, between Marcos and Heather. The assignment was a problem/solution paper, and Marcos said that she wanted him to change his whole essay when it was really a matter of her approach differing from his.

Marcos:	I just don't want to change it like that. I don't see why it makes a difference. I like to let the reader gradually find out what the problem is, first kind of talk about what happens when people get welfare and don't ever get off it.
Heather:	I think he should get more to the point because I couldn't really tell what the problem was...I thought maybe it was about drugs or something.
Marcos:	In her paper, she likes goes from zero to sixty in one sentence. She gets right to it...but I didn't write mine that way.

I felt that the best advice for Marcos was to try for a shorter set up time, but that there was nothing wrong with Marcos revealing the problem by first describing its effects. In another peer response session, this one for a controversial essay paper, Marcos found his work the subject of severe scrutiny when he adopted a pro-abortion stance. This was a clear case of him against the girls, and it had nothing to do with the way he wrote his paper, but with the position he'd taken. The girls aggresively attacked his opening: "Some women are doing the kids a favor" by repeatedly questioning how killing them could possibly be a favor, even though I felt he had sufficiently explained his position. They also vehemently argued that he was making numerous generalizations, such as when he stated that a poor kid only has a future in "drug dealing," and that he didn't include enough "scientific facts" to support his argument. They also both wrote the question "how about adoption?" several times on his paper. They were both incensed by his position, and apparently took it out on his paper. The discussion became a debate, with Marcos giving no ground. Apparently his desire to impress Wendy didn't override his own defense mechanism, at least at the moment. From a critical thinking and verbal exercise point of view, the session was a success. In my opinion, however, I would have preferred that his paper, the text itself, be a bigger part of their conversation. It was left on the sidelines, not part of the real action that was taking place within the group. I question which is more important: the idea or how its expressed? It would seem that the whole idea of writing is the ability to express ideas, and if the ideas strike the reader as unsupported or ill-conceived, then the ideas themselves are weakened. On the other hand, the issue is also whether the students have been taught to understand this as well. Perhaps the modeling and the assignment didn't make this clear.

Overall, this group assumed it was doing its job and had the grades to prove it. Nevertheless, I observed them to be very ineffective at times.

Group D

Jillian, Amanda and Sarah compose a group of ninth grade Honors students who meet first thing in the morning. Of the four groups studied, this

one tries the hardest to follow my instructions and really seems to utilize the peer response activity for personal improvement. My reported observations of the first three groups focused on the `conversation' that took place during peer response sessions; the report of observations of Group D will include those as well, but will also take a closer look at the written responses entered on the peer response sheets.

Amanda, 14, usually turns in cosmetically perfect homework assignments that have been written on a computer. Her father is a successful building contractor who also owns a large hardware store in the area, her mother is a homemaker, and her older sister is an excellent student. Amanda devours books over the summer, reading ten to twenty, mostly fiction by women writers, and when she has time, will do recreational writing. She seems to have a superior understanding of the writing process; Amanda sees her first drafts as "a blob of raw ideas...I can keep the thoughts and main ideas and work around them on the other drafts." Amanda feels that peer response activities are only useful if all the students in the group are on the "same level."

Jillian, 14, consistently scores the highest composition grades in class, and frequently expresses strong opinions. When she's writing, she feels that ideas are more important than the language used to express them. Jillian says that she seldom reads for fun but loves to write poems and poetry. Her father is a computer programmer and her mother is a homemaker who is very active in parent organizations in our school. She says that the problem with peer response is that other students "don't read it with the enthusiasm of the writer...I like to read my own writing and I will change things on my own."

Sarah, 14, is quite smart but can be easily frustrated at times. She also can be critical of everything around her: teachers, other students, assignments, etc. Her father is a computer instructor and her mother is manager of a local store. Sarah writes serious, dark poems that she defines as "weird," and enjoys reading biographies on her favorite rock and television stars. She says that she's not always comfortable with sharing her work: "I sometimes feel this way when someone who knows they're a good writer reads my work, or if I write on something that's embarrassing."

As is usually the case with response groups, the positions of each group in

the classroom environment are usually the same for each session; there is a kind of territoritality at work. This group likes to sit side-by-side on the floor, with their backs to the same wall, in an empty space by the classroom door. They are normally very quick to remove their essays from their binders and exchange them. They like to hold mini-debriefings after the first exchange, although I encourage them to save their discussion until after each student's work has been read by the other two members.

One of my favorite essay assignments is the "problem/solution" paper, a staple of many English classrooms. The student is required to describe a community problem (can be a group of friends, family, village, country or global community), and then provide a solution for the problem. Amanda's problem was rather uninspired: smog. Jillian and Sarah's papers, however, were more interesting. Jillian argued that the prohibition of prayer at the high school graduation was a problem for those who believe in God and the power of prayer. Sarah chose to write about the gossip and backstabbing that goes on among her friends. I noticed that their comments on the peer response sheets, which contained questions that were more evaluative than usual (focusing on the interest level of the introduction, the listing of causes and effects, the logic of the solution, paragraph organization, run-on sentences and the mechanics of spelling and grammar), were quite benign in nature: they all were quite approving of each other's introductory paragraph, found the solutions completely logical and gave very general responses when asked to identify the causes of the problems. For example, although the cause of Jillian's problem - that prayer is not allowed at the graduation ceremony - would have to be the school board, both Sarah and Amanda saw the case as: "our rights are being imposed upon" or "our Constitution guarantees freedom of religion." They mistook the problem's effects as the problem's cause. As for the mechanics of spelling and grammar, no run-on sentences or grammatical errors were found in any paper, but both Sarah and Jillian zeroed in on Amanda's poor spelling. It seemed to me at the time that their answers on those response sheets would do little to help them improve their papers; in fact, could be construed as a de-motivating element of the process: why change a thing when everything is wonderful?

Things got a little more interesting when I joined the group discussion and

asked them to re-think their comments. When I asked Sarah, knowing that she needed little prompting to release her critical nature, if she really thought that Jillian's prayer problem was a problem if it only affected a minority of students at the high school, she stated that she had been wondering about that but didn't write anything on the peer response sheets. "You can just go to a private school if you don't like it," she argued. That provoked an instant reply from Jillian, who maintained that it was a problem to anyone who believed in God. Amanda concurred with this answer, but Sarah said, "You can believe in God but not care about praying in public." Jillian said, "but some people <u>do</u> care, and it's a problem to them." I myself played a part in this conversation without saying anything. I would nod or gesture approvingly whenever Sarah made a point, to help bolster her attack in the face of Amanda and Jillian, though I was careful not to overdo it. My reason was simply to support questioning. Probably to no one's surprise, Jillian wearied of the argument and deflected the attention to Sarah's paper, asking if it made a difference that Sarah admitted to gossiping herself, as being part of the problem. Sarah responded that "everybody does it," and that she would be wrong to leave herself out of it. Amanda sided with Sarah here, stating that a person can know they have a problem and still not be able to solve it. "If I drove a car I would be part of the smog problem, even though I wouldn't like it," she said.

This group had something more to say when challenged by me. Without my intervention, however, the group had lulled themselves into a state of contentment. Our conversation was good, I believe, because it made them re-think the basic ideas of their papers. They were asked to see these ideas from a different perspective, that of a critical eye that wasn't convinced of their basic premise, of Jillian's prayer problem and Sarah's admitted gossiping.

Time and time again, high school teachers are reminded that students do have a tendancy to be too nice to each other. It's obvious that they are advocates of the idea that those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones; even the best writers don't like to assume the mantle of authority...that's the teacher's job, why should they endanger their own compositions?

But this isn't always the case with this group. One assignment asked the

students to examine the changes that occurred to any of the main characters they'd read so far, to look at the 'roundness' of the character. The three girls were particularly good at giving constructive criticism when they met to respond to each other's interpretation papers. For example, both Sarah and Amanda felt that Jillian needed to establish the character's life (Scout, in <u>To Kill A Mockingbird</u>) before the changes occurred to the character, to form a foundation for change. Amanda suggested on the peer response sheet that such information should be placed in the second paragraph, and her overall impression was effective in its use of specific positive feedback:

> "I think the paper was very good! Fix the thing that I told you about and it will be great! I didn't see any spelling errors but you might want to look over it just to be sure. I think you did a wonderful job using quotes and gave a good idea of why Scout was making judgments."

Jillian also focused on an area of improvement in Amanda's paper, pointing out that she didn't have any quotes, even though they were reading the second draft of the assignment, and that she needed them as "proof of your (her) ideas." Jillian also was specific in the positive feedback that she gave on the written response sheet:

> "I really enjoyed reading this essay. The introduction was interesting and it really "pulled me in." All of the information fit the essay and was put into good paragraphs. The main idea was understandable and wise to choose to write about. In my opinion, this is the best paper you've written. The effort and improvement is definitely noticable."

One of the positive outcomes of peer response is its effect on the responder - students sometimes will see things in another student's writing that relates to their own writing. Amanda had concluded that Jillian's paper should have been broken into more paragraphs for clarity's sake, something we had talked about in class. Jillian's paper had a total of five paragraphs, which, according to Amanda, was "too little." She added, "I think the last paragraph should have another one added." This not-too-clearly expresses her opinion that at least one more paragraph was needed at the conclusion. Amanda's own paper, however, had only four paragraphs. Although paragraph length is subjective to the writing style of the author, did Amanda's observation of Jillian's paragraphing cause Amanda to see the

same possible problem with her own paper? A look at the students' drafts in the following section will reveal if she indeed had done so.

What verification have I found of my observations?

Ethnographic studies create a thick description of their subject based upon observation and participation by the observer. There's so much weight placed on the perspective of the observer that most ethnographers also attempt to "verify" their findings by looking to perspectives other than their own. By doing so, the study takes on the trappings of a more scientific approach, but this verification is still quite limited. Sailors use triangulation (pin pointing their location by looking to outside reference points) to find where they are on the open sea; ethnographers also utilize other references to aid them in describing what happened, but what happened in a group session can't be pinpointed, because it isn't fixed in space. It's more a matter of including other perspectives in the thick description so we can see it more fully. Each perspective fleshes out the picture of what happened.

For the purposes of this study, these other perspectives include the students answers to a questionnaire that asked them to describe what they felt happened in their group, post-peer session oral questioning, portfolio assessments of their work, and lastly, the actual text of their papers. The focus here is on the revision draft that occurs following a peer response session, and whether it appears to reflect the written and oral comments that are made during the session. The papers give an indication then, of which peer comments the writer decided to address and the value or weight the writer placed on the comments that were made.

The questionnaire was handed to the students immediately after their session and it asked the following questions:
- Who spoke the most?
- Name one of the things you talked about.
- Were there any disagreements? What were they about?
- What kind of changes to your paper were recommended by your group?

I speculated that Amanda's writing would benefit from her response to Jillian's paper, that she would see the same problem in her paper (low number of paragraphs) that she found in Jillian's. As stated earlier, I felt this

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way because Amanda is a secure student, has been successful, believes in "fair play" when being critical of her friend's paper, and, most importantly, trusts her own judgment as the ultimate judgment.

An examination of the second and final drafts of Amanda's interpretation paper reveals that she did in fact add a substantial 100-plus word paragraph to her paper. The paragraph was placed at the end, where she elaborated on her interpretation and added a quote for support.

Observations of group D indicated that they had an involved, constructive session for this assignment, and the students were asked to tell what happened immediately afterward:

Jillian: Sarah and I found some spelling mistakes -

Amanda: You always do! I can't spell. I learned phonetically...

Jillian: She needed more quotes too. She had really good ideas but she needed quotes to support them. And they found things about my paper, too. They wanted me to make my last paragraph a little longer...

Sarah: And to describe Scout some more, in her paper she was talking about the decision she made but needed to tell more about what kind of little girl she was.

Me: So you did some talking other than telling each other what great writers you are...

Sarah: We _are_ great writers...we're just telling the truth.

Jillian: We talked a _lot_ about our papers this time.

A look at Amanda's final draft paper reveals that besides adding the final paragraph, she made substantial changes, particularly by adding quotes from the novel and explanations of these quotes. She even used one of her responder's suggested phrases, copying it verbatim. She also added an entire sentence to three different places in her paper. This is typical of Amanda's approach. Amanda's final drafts always reflected what had occurred in the group session, though the amount of change in her papers that could be attributed to peer comments varied from paper to paper. She was the student quoted earlier as viewing the rough draft as just a "blob of raw ideas," which apparently allows her to view these ideas as open to revision.

This would appear to be Jillian's feeling on the subject of revision, for her

final drafts very seldom showed any change at all. Her entire approach to writing relies on a careful, highly structured first attempt. Even her rough drafts show few crossings-out, and hardly any global changes. She is more preoccupied with re-wordings as she moves through the first two drafts, and by the final draft, nothing is changed. For example, she rejects her group's suggestions on ways to improve her interpretation paper, even though she acknowledges that those suggestions are possibly valuable in the post-session interview. Though I would consider Jillian fairly rigid in her acceptance of peer opinion, she sees herself as somewhat open to her peers. On a revision scale of one to ten, with ten being no revisions at all, Jillian rates herself as a "five", saying "I like to revise some things but others I <u>won't</u> change." Evidence throughout the months of observation indicates that she doesn't change most things. This seems to work for her. Her composition grades are usually quite high.

Sarah, who had engaged in a particularly spirited dialogue during the session on the problem-solution paper, made no changes at all to the draft read by her group. Her final draft was exactly the same from start to finish. I had thought that the conversation that I had instigated with my questions had caused them to re-think their positions, but this was not the case with Sarah and Jillian, who both used the sessions for great debate, but seldom changed what they brought into the group. Sarah usually re-works her words, sentences and phrases at the rough draft level, though she occasionally completely rewrites her introductory paragraphs.

This prompted me to adjust my evaluation of good peer group discussion: I had initially observed this group to be good students who sometimes appeared to be too content with their work, for they appeared to avoid evaluative responses and were generally very approving of each other's writing. On the surface, my observations were not inconsistent with my attempts to verify them. But it appears that I was over optimistic in my assessment of the degree to which their discussions and written responses were actually utilized by the writers. Their discussions were often on-task and featured the kind of thinking that would be consistent with Bruffee's objectives of peer response, and their comments on the peer response sheets seemed to verify their sense of responsibility to the task. Nevertheless, it

would appear that Sarah and Jillian, two very good writers, don't really like to change what they've written, and do most of their work at the early invention and rough draft stage. In attempting to account for their resistance to change, I examined how I was teaching them, and I made some subsequent changes to my grading. The final draft is usually due one week after the peer response session, which I feel is enough time to do revision that is more than just cosmetic. Both final draft is always accompanied by the previous drafts, stapled in order and including the peer response sheet. I emphasize that the final draft is actually a "package" and that revision is expected. I considered grading them down if they didn't solve the problems that their peers pointed out but concluded that it would be better to simply insist that some changes be made, whether prompted from self-examination or peer response. But the pedogogical change that had the greatest effect was my addition of a "process grade" to their final draft. They received two grades, an overall final grade as usual, and another grade of lower value, based soley on the amount of change made to the second (edit) draft by comparing it to the third (final) draft. The weight of the process grade is one fourth the value of the final grade.

Group A (Russell, Arriana and Jennifer) acknowledged Russell's limited input, as was observed in a post-session questionnaire. Arriana commented that it was "only because Russell doesn't like writing as much as Jennifer and I do." My feeling was that Jennifer and Arriana probably preferred that Russell didn't have an active role in the group's discussions, they enjoyed their two-way conversation and wouldn't tolerate too much intervention.

At the end of the year, the group was asked to arrange a list of writing skills according to how important each one was, the list being, "details, opening paragraph, clarity, grammar, mechanics, flow (transitions), logical thinking." All three members of the group favored `clarity of writing' and `introductory paragraph' as the two most important skills. Jennifer used one of the sessions as an example: "Sometimes things aren't quite clear to another person reading the paper. You want to understand what you're reading, that's a big part of it."   There is an unspoken consensus of focus among the three, and I think this is due to the close relationship between Arriana and Jennifer, a relationship centered around a mutual love of writing and a

respect for each other. They dictate the sessions. And Russell, who is a solid B student, is happy to follow their lead. There couldn't be a greater lack of consensus, however, when it came to the amount of revision each writer did following the peer response session. Generally Russell did almost nothing, Arriana was sporadic in her revising, and Jennifer often did extensive revision. It could be that Russell felt that Jennifer and Arriana were the toughest audience he faced, and as a matter of personal pride Russell put most of his effort into the first two drafts. The second draft, the draft that is read by the group, contained many cross-outs (a typical paper had 14 single words and 6 phrases) in what was perhaps his attempt to give them some of his best writing. And usually Russell's first draft had fewer changes. Once he was past the hurdle of the group session, however, his writing usually showed very few changes.

As observed, the group had some very good conversations but had a tendency to enter common teen language, casual and lacking specific detail. I often wondered if they were engaging deeply enough to make specific improvements to their papers, and my thoughts seemed verified by an examination of the post-response drafts. Russell certainly wasn't motivated to improve his paper, and although Arriana was a much better writer, she didn't make many changes following the response session. She did, however, respond to the few direct suggestions about using better words. For example, she completely ignored Jennifer's suggestions (quoted earlier) about shortening up sections of her autobiographical paper. As a general rule, Arriana's style of composition construction emphasized the rough draft, where she overwrote and correctedly heavily as she went along, making many global changes, additions in the margins and arrows signaling the movement of paragraphs.

Jennifer's papers underwent serious revisions at every stage and she followed the suggestions of the members of her group. Jennifer is the best writer of the three, although Arriana is a close second. When Jennifer revises, she changes her word order, creates new paragraphs and adds details.

Jennifer's autobiographical incident paper was a source of great discussion, as was observed and documented earlier in this chapter.Interestingly, it became one of her most heavily revised papers, a

form of verification of what I witnessed and suspected about Jennifer's writing habits. Although Jennifer usually makes changes to all her drafts, with or without prompting from her group members, she seemed to benefit from the extra attention her paper received, or perhaps was inspired to make the paper better because of that attention. She zealously followed Arriana's suggestion to add descriptive details to the beginning of her story. Jennifer added street names, identified the band playing on the radio, added adjectives to the car they were riding in. For example, she had written on the edit draft, "The air smelled wonderful, with a crisp spring breeze flowing through the trees," and on the final draft supplanted that with, "The air smelled wonderful, the crisp spring breeze caressing our faces as we sped down Lone Pine Canyon Road."

Most significantly, Jennifer added a new 12-line paragraph, a passage that builds toward the pot smoking scene, that describes her feelings, and a brief encounter with a jogger and her dog. I believe that Jennifer has a greater sense of audience than most students because she publishes a music 'zine of her own making, and that this contributes to her zest for revision and her willingness to listen to Arriana, a respected reader.

Group B (Rachel, Paul and Kristi) is a group that was observed to work in fits and starts, and would easily become mired in discussion. All three write well but their personalities are very different, and the group chemistry suffers for it, according to my field notes, with Rachel able to subvert the peer response process and Paul extremely sensitive to perceived criticism.

As with all groups, a questionnaire was handed out at the end of every observation, and it asked the students to describe what went on during the peer response session. Paul verified my suspicions when he once said, "They (Kristi and Rachel) really don't ever agree with me and I don't like that," which I found to be overly sensitive in light of what I observed. He complained more than once of the girls conspiring to criticize some part of his paper. Nevertheless, he must have seen the value in their comments, because the final draft of his papers always reflected the suggestions the girls made during the peer response session. His literary analysis paper, for example,

The following is a page from the final draft of Jennifer's paper:

The end of May had proven... absolutely beautiful day. It happened to be in Wrightwood, at a friend's party. With my friend and two of her other friends. All my friend Cari, and the other two girls Dana and Leanna. Dana needed to drop her car off at her own house, and the ride to her house was an awful break from the extremely boring party. We were all comfortable in Dana's extra large car, listening to the band Bellvon the radio as fragrant pine trees flew passed the open windows. The air smelled wonderful, the crisp spring breeze caressing our faces as we sped down Lone Pine Canyon road. The two mile drive was over a bit too soon though, and we were back on our feet in the calm evening lights.

Dana and Leanna rushed into Dana's house to "get a few things" while Cari and I waited outside. The sky began to fade to grey, the trees drooping sadly as Dana and Leanna ran out of Dana's bedroom window. They leaped from the window sill with a rolled up bag of marijuana, and dashed up the driveway. Cari and I following...

It was like we were running away from the world, from life, trying to do our dirty deed unnoticed. But then again, I was no criminal, just someone along for the ride. The girls had found some bushes and brush to hide behind after a brief encounter with a jogger and her dog. We all hunched down close to the ground, trying to stay out of the view of the nearby houses and roadways that threatened to capture and discover us.

Then they started smoking, as if it was just a routine, normal thing such as talking. They passed the "bowl" around to Dana, Leanna, Cari and finally, me. Their expectant eyes made me uneasy as I replied "no thanks, I'm not into that stuff" to their utter...

I could tell that after I had refused to smoke, they all felt really low and stupid for doing drugs.

like lemmings. As Leanna and Dana ran up the road with their treasure. The stars in the blue sky grew gloomy and dark. The trees and sky looked all clean as we ran off like thieves, down those once bright and beautiful streets.

We slowed to a walk, out of breath and panting, while Dana revealed to us the things that they had retrieved from her room. A smashed up Ziploc bag of pot and a bowl, to smoke it in, made from a smashed slice can with some holes in it. And to my surprise, they had planned to smoke this stuff on that trip all along.

We were to go to "the wash" and "smoke out", then return to the party as if nothing had ever happened. Like little children stealing from the cookie jar, we ran towards the "wash" to hide in its depths. I felt like a fugitive when I found myself running through a poor old man's yard, scurrying over his fresh cut firewood and property that he had worked hard to earn. I didn't really feel guilty for this though, just awkward, following those girls down the steep rocky slopes into the mucky water of the...

As I sat there, being eaten alive by blood sucking mosquitos, some hikers began rustling through the bushes quite near us. We dashed off down the wash, the mucky water splashing onto our legs until we escaped to the safety of the highway. As I gasped for breath, I was full of mixed emotions. I was so happy that I had refused the pot, but so sad because I felt like a party pooper.

I just can't seem to understand why most teenagers have to do drugs to have any fun. No one has any life to talk about and no mind to talk to anymore. All they want to hear about is drugs, nothing else. It seems that everyone just wants to get high...

I awakened from my thoughts as I was needed to rescue Cari, Dana and Leanna from wandering into the roadway traffic and killing themselves.

underwent extensive changes at two critical sections, the beginning and the ending, and these changes were in direct response to Kristi's remarks that, "the first sentence could put someone to sleep," which does seem a rather hostile way to put it, though teenagers often lack tact despite instructions to use some diplomacy in their suggestions. Although the sessions could be a bit upsetting to Paul, he appeared to benefit from them. He frequently took the suggestions and responded to comments from the girls. The conversations were spicy, but as Bruffee would agree, divergent opinions are considered a healthy part of peer response, and a needed part if students are to think on their own. His self-esteem may have suffered during the peer sessions themselves, but he took pride in his grades and did well in class. I didn't experiment with the membership of the groups, though this would no doubt be interesting to observe. It might be significant to know how he reacted in a different group, and whether his writing would show any improvement if he was placed with two overly sympathetic friends.

As for Rachel, she says of a typical session, "they want me to say that I'm wrong, but I won't." She also believed that neither Kristi nor Paul cared about the advice she had to offer, and admitted rather defiantly that she usually wasn't convinced to "change a single word" of her edit draft. An attempt to verify this via an examination of her work reveals this to be true. Rachel had some final drafts that were simply neat copies of the previous draft, the edit draft. The most she would ever change were words and phrases. She would, however, always submit an edit draft that was substantially different from the rough draft, with both global and sentence structure changes. She clearly revised much on her own before the peer response session.

The conversations had by the group never affected Kristi's outlook much, in that she wrote well and usually inspired a consensus of opinion among Rachel and Paul that all was right with her work. Rachel did less criticizing of Kristi than she did of Paul and during the oral sessions she responded more to her ideas. Interestingly, Kristi often made some extensive changes to her final draft that had no basis in the peer response session, that didn't stem from either the written peer response sheet or the discussion. These changes she made to the final draft usually were in addition rather than subtraction,

usually adding more examples; she also played with the opening paragraph quite a bit with each subsequent draft. Of the three, she produced some of the best papers in the class.

In this group, the effects of the peer response session on the revision process is mysterious, but it's clear that their revision process does distinctly benefit at times. Both Paul and Kristi's papers were markedly improved from edit draft to final draft.

Lastly, as with the others, my attempt to verify my observations of Group C also proved to be illuminating. I had observed a verbal fracas over Marcos's opinion paper on abortion, and tried to emphasize that a teacher doesn't personally consider the nature of the opinions expressed, but rather how they were supported and expressed. I later wanted to know what they thought a teacher did consider? I asked them immediately following that session to complete the following sentence on a piece of paper: "A perfect paper for a teacher is one that..." Marcos wrote, "A perfect paper to me is a real effort by the person writing the paper." Heather wrote, " A perfect paper is one that gets the point across in a thoughtful and creative way, one that `hooks' the reader." Wendy wrote, "A perfect paper clearly states your topic, is well organized, ideas are clearly interpreted, and clearly states your opinion on the topic."

All three are students with the same teacher in the same class and yet they had three substantially different opinions on what a perfect paper is. For Marcos, a display of effort is enough; for Heather, creativity and interest rank high; and for Wendy, clarity and organization are paramount. Perhaps their sense of a perfect paper is only a representation of what they each perceive as their biggest personal obstacle to perfection. Marcos wants to make sure that he gives a good effort, that he takes the assignment seriously enough. Heather wants to make sure that her ideas are interesting and not banal, that her work isn't ignored. And Wendy might be expressing her fear that her paper might be unstructured and reveal messy thinking.These do represent some fundamental differences. However, it's not so much that their ideas of a perfect paper don't concur with each other, but rather that they have some very different personalities beneath the quite congenial atmosphere that exists most of the time. This would seem to verify the disagreements I

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occasionally observed within the group. I had suggested earlier that Wendy's budding relationship with Marcos was beneficial to his writing, but that it seemed to get in the way of the response group. All three would spend much time in off-task conversations. Upon further examination of my observations of this group, I think they are responding somewhat artificially - avoiding a real reaction to each other's work to keep the peace. Because when they do react, they can sometimes be extremely at odds with each other. Marcos in particular can become agitated by their response, and definitely when he receives criticism. He is trying to impress Wendy, and, like Paul, doesn't like it when his paper is evaluated negatively.

A last word on the "perfect paper" question. They wanted to know, naturally, what the correct answer was, and I told them that my idea of a perfect paper was simply one in which the writers achieve their goal, write a perfect rendition of what they set out to do. " For me, these goals are directly related to the kind of writing being done: persuasive essays must convince me, observation essays must contains insightful, detailed, acccurate observations, biographical essays must show their subject in an interesting and detailed light, etc. The subjects and opinions are not judged, but the way they are expressed are.My goal wasn't to get a B minus on that last paper!" exclaimed Marcos.

In actuality, one of his goals appeared to be an attempt to get revenge on the girls for ganging up on him for his pro-abortion stance in his controversial issue paper. An examination of his paper revealed a startling revision: he thoroughly revised it, adding more arguments and more detail and emphasized different elements. The verification here is of the motivating element inherent in his argument with the girls, of the challenges posed by the girls. He obviously felt a need to bolster his argument, which he continued into his writing of the final draft. However, he did not do this to his problem/solution paper. Heather's critique of his paper, he said at the time, was simply a matter of differing approaches. He meant that, and was verified by his final draft, which contained virtually no changes from the response group draft. I believe the difference between these two interactions lies in the amount of passion on both sides; passionate responses possibly yields passionate revisions. He simply cared more about the controversial

essay.

This group was observed doing extensive talking off-task, although in the post-response group questionnaire, they showed little recognition of this fact. This verifies that they're unaware of the problem, which explains why they don't change their behavior. A look at their final drafts reveal that they talk a great deal but it may be a case of "much ado about nothing." Marcos, the lesser of the three writers here, did the most revising overall throughout the five assignments observed. Heather and Wendy did very little, with Wendy doing the least of all. Wendy, in fact, made almost no changes from her rough draft. And yet Marcos and Heather often praised her writing. A chief characteristic of Wendy's writing was its length; she frequently overwrote the requirements of the assignment, and they seemed to perceive this as a demonstration of skill, or perhaps had trouble responding to so much verbage. She could have used some constructive criticism, which she seldom received; she tended to inaccurately follow the dictates of the assignment, resulting in lower grades than she deserved, considering her ability.

In conclusion, my ethnological study revealed that what goes on in groups can vary significantly from group to group, despite identical assignments and the same instruction and modeling of group behavior. It seems to verify that writing is indeed a highly personal act, one that differs from person to person and group to group as much as personalities differ among a classroom of students. Also, students just don't seem to adopt the goals and objectives of the teacher as much as the teacher would like. For example, the students were usually less likely to discuss the expression of the idea than the idea itself, though written expression is the essence of what most high school composition is all about. Another example of this difference between the goals of the student and teacher can be seen in the papers themselves; peer response sessions didn't necessarily result in subsequent revision of the compositions, despite the fact that this is the main reason for doing them in the first place. However, it shouldn't be overlooked that sometimes peer response activities provoked heavy revision of the rough draft, possibly in anticipation of the writing being read by others.

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Chapter Four
- CONCLUSION -
FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

It was established in the second chapter that there were numerous approaches to group work under the name of peer response, and that what divided the approaches was the amount of peer judgment involved - on one end of the spectrum is pure reader response and on the other is critical evaluation. Those whose work forms the philosophical foundation of peer group activities, such as Vygotsky and Bruffee, were discussed in chapter one, where it was established that peer response is based on "learning as a social construct," and the importance of the "conversation" to group interaction.

Many teachers, like myself, use peer response as both a reader response and as an evaluative tool. Teachers, regardless of their approach, have written in practitioner journals that peer response doesn't always work, that the students are sometimes incapable of helping each other, as was reported in chapter two.

Joining the research community of peer response groups, I conducted a five-month ethnographic study of twelve students in my high school classes. The purpose of the study was to report what goes on in peer response groups, based on various observations and attempted verification of these observations. The study is not representative of of classrooms in general, nor can it generate hypotheses for what will happen in other classrooms. But, as Stephen M. North points out, the ethnographic study is valuable, nevertheless, because it "enlarges (the universe of human discourse) and makes it bigger" (North 284).

The thick description of the 12 students involved in peer response contained some observations that I believe are of particular interest:

- Some students, such as Jillian, Sarah and Wendy, didn't make changes to their papers following peer response, but these same students often put a great deal of energy and revision into their edit draft, the draft that was read by the peer response group.

- There was evidence that the peer response sessions that seemed more like debates sometimes prompted dramatic revision that improved the paper substantially, as was the case with Marcos, who felt that his opinions were being challenged.
- The sexual chemistry of the group can affect its performance.
- The students would spend much more time talking about an essay that was interesting to them than one that wasn't, resulting in a rich response to the former but a neglect of the latter.
- Sometimes the group members were very receptive to the responses, particularly if they came from a member or members whom they respect, and of course, the converse is also true: some writers had no faith in the value of response from someone whose writing was of lesser ability.
- Sometimes the alliances and divisions that would form in the groups were beneficial and at other times they weren't.
- Students who challenge the status quo of a group may be a necessary part of the process.
- Students would occasionally give me the impression that they were going to make changes to their papers based on comments they made in response sessions, and then did not make those changes.
- Student sometimes see ways to improve their own writing when responding to the writing of others.
- The students sometimes lapsed into easy-going responses that were too vague and uninspiring to make a difference to the paper.
- A teacher's participation can bring focus and force a new perspective upon the group.
- Sometimes the students give much more weight to the ideas in an essay than to how they are expressed.
- Students sometimes appear confused over how to respond to a particular assignment.
- When the teacher had brainstormed with the entire class on an assignment, students sometimes echo that session, with similar ideas and unoriginal thinking.

There are pedagogical implications to these observations. For one, those

students who don't revise following the response session may be more concerned with impressing their group audience than impressing the teacher by following the writing process as instructed; instead of handing their peer responders a work-in-progress, these students prefer to give them a nearly final draft, using the session as motivation to revise extensively before the group meets. The revision of the rough draft was often both global and incidental, indicating that the students were reconsidering their entire approach and cleaning the paper up for publication, so to speak. There's nothing wrong in approaching the second draft with this attitude. The flaw, however, occurs if the students don't continue to see their paper as a work-in-progress, and fails to further improve their work.Perhaps what I observed in these cases wasn't so much a failure of the response groups to provoke revision of the final draft as it was an indication of how students will change the revision process to reflect their own priorities. When Wendy puts all her time into the first two drafts but none to the final draft, focusing on the group as her primary audience, she cheats herself out of another revision. However, it could be argued that this flaw notwithstanding, the response group is functioning to assist her, albeit indirectly. It's possible that without a response group activity, Wendy wouldn't engage in serious revision at all. Obviously, her paper would be even better if she also revised in response to direct outside opinion.

The fact that students sometimes highly value their peer audience must be taken into account when judging the usefulness of the peer response process. Teachers who take this into account should place extra value on the students reading their work aloud by giving extra credit to readers and by modeling enthusiastic audience response. The right chemistry and atmosphere in a classroom can sometimes even prompt shy students to read, as well as those who are concerned about their appearance, speech, or writing.

My observations also suggest that the group could benefit by my manipulating the membership of the groups to avoid cliques from developing, and from having a student become the odd one out. The idea of breaking up old friends, though a common classroom practice to discourage off-task talking, has its downside. Students are sometimes more likely to let their feelings out when among friends, and are sometimes overly polite to

acquaintances.

This would indicate that teacher observation of peer response groups is important, if not critical. Teachers must decide if the group is working effectively via observation. Teachers who sit at their desks, watching over the general atmosphere of the room aren't in a position to judge how particular groups are working. Observation can also provide the teacher with information for classroom research.

The need for observation is perhaps of little dispute among teachers, but the issue of teacher participation in peer response groups is more controversial. As stated in earlier chapters, there are those who see direct participation being too controling. I found, however, that one of the biggest problems with peer response groups, complacency, was solved by my intervention. This can be done in a variety of ways and in a manner of degree. Teachers sitting in on a group can ask the students to be more specific, to give precise examples. In this case the intervention is limited. They can also, however, jolt the group by pointing out contradictions in their thinking, or by pitting their ideas against each other, as I did with Sarah, Jillian and Amanda. It would seem that a teacher's involvement with a group should necessarily be different from group to group; some groups simply don't need it to operate effectively. Again, teacher observation will help determine when and how to take part in each group.

It's only natural that students talk more about topics and essays that they find interesting. This might suggest that dull assignments be avoided, that issues of the day and current concerns are the most interesting to write about. Or it might suggest that students need to write interesting, stimulating essays if they want the complete attention of their group.

The study also verifies the experiences of other practitioners. The problems they report with off-task conversation and the tendency toward banal, easy-going responses were also exhibited by the students involved in my study. There's certainly a clear indication, as stated in chapter three, that students see themselves as living in glass houses; that the nature of exchanging papers inherently contains this fear. There may not be anything an instructor can do to change this, or it could suggest re-structuring the peer response session so that the writer isn't present in the group that is reading his or her paper. For

example, students could first hand in their compositions to the teacher, who would then disseminate them to the groups or the names could be covered and numbers used instead, to grant everyone anonymity. This might be the basis for a future study, to determine what difference occurs between anonymous peer responses and those where all parties are known.

Another thorny issue in the teaching of composition is whether the ideas expressed are more important than how they are expressed. Are teachers looking for good English or good thinking? I always believed that it was a combination of the two that makes a paper good and I try to make that clear to my students, sometimes unsuccessfully. In any case, it's worth repeating to the students throughout the year that original ideas are very valuable, but unless persuasively stated, can lose their potentcy. Clarity is the key.

But ideas that are overly familiar can make an essay seem banal, no matter how fluid the language. Originality is easily sacrificed when deadlines are threatening them at every turn. There were times when students like Rachael (the group cynic) commented that everyone wrote the same thing because of the brainstorming and discussion done in class. One way to avoid this would be to do brainstorming in groups, which would at least restrict the number of students exposed to the same ideas.

Since this thesis is about peer response and revision, it should be stated that students aren't the only one who must learn to revise. Teachers must also be willing to revise their lesson plan and their approach to the peer response process if they want to see it work more effectively. For example, my idea to add a "process grade" to the students' final drafts was successful in motivating them to make changes, though it certainly required much more effort on my part. I have since decided to do it from time to time, without notice, so that I don't always have that double work load of grading the final paper and looking at previous drafts to determine what kind of revision grade to give. By being random in which assignments receive a process grade, and by doing so without warning, I hope to keep the students on their toes. It has also occurred to me that I concentrate too much of my modeling of peer response techniques at the beginning of the school year, and that I need to not only continue to do so throughout the year but perhaps also show the students what I expect for each individual assignment.

In summary, the ethnographic study conducted as part of this thesis paper gave some insight on the kinds of conversations that take place in peer response groups and how the groups affected the subsequent revisions. It's hoped that my ethnographic research added to the map of peer response, filled in some lines on its territory. The value of ethnographic studies and certainly of this small contribution, is of dispute by some research-philosophers like North, but I can turn to Joe Belanger and hope that he isn't being overly optimistic when he states:

> ...what has resurfaced in the last decade is the conviction that classroom teachers are in the best position to solve many of the complex problems of education, and whatis new is the recent acceptance of classroom observation as legitimate research. (Belanger 16)

Bibliography of Chapter Four

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