Peer Writing Response Groups in a Language Minority Classroom

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Introduction

In the fall of 1995 I was offered an opportunity to engage in a teacher action research project sponsored by the California Writing Project. At the time I was a bilingual teacher in the upper elementary grades working in a school in a low-income area. In my classroom I used a writing process approach—writers’ workshop—to help my students become more proficient writers. But over the years I had become dissatisfied with the depth of analysis my students were able to demonstrate regarding their own and each other’s writing. I decided to try formal peer response groups to see if this would facilitate their ability to become better writers and better at responding to literature. I saw that response groups might be a way to help the students get beyond superficial analysis. I would use this research project to help me study the effectiveness of this strategy with my students.

Throughout my career my goal has been to have my students be as independent as possible. It is in this way that they will be empowered to succeed as adults, to feel respected, and to enjoy learning. It is equally important that they learn to work together (i.e., the interpersonal/social aspect). To succeed in practically any arena in life, both the ability to know how to work toward one’s own goal and the ability to work with others are essential. I thought the use of peer writing response groups—the focus of this paper—would be a great way to better prepare my students for these long term goals while also building as appropriate skills and abilities.

When I began the investigation of this paper, I had been using writers’ workshop in my classroom for seven years based on what I had learned from books, from workshops on the practice, and from colleagues. I had come to think of myself as somewhat of an expert on writers’ workshop to the point where I was regularly giving workshops to other teachers on how to set up a writers’ workshop in their classrooms. Originally I developed my model of writers’ workshop directly from Lucy McCormick Calkin’s book, The Art of Teaching Writing (Calkins, 1994), and from Nancie Atwell’s book, In the Middle (Atwell, 1998). Over the years I adapted it and changed it based on my style and the particular needs of my students in any given year, or time of year. I was always looking for ways to improve on it, make it run smoother and more powerfully. I was constantly learning new strategies from other teachers and new writings on the topic as well.

I had found writers’ workshop to be an effective way to get my students to engage in writing. They found writing enjoyable. They experienced a pride in what they wrote and in what their peers wrote. I also saw growth in their writing over time as they continued to write and receive response and guidance over the year, or often two-year period, that I worked with my students. However, I was not seeing my students engaged in the kind of serious revision of their work that I was looking for. Nor was I hearing deep, “under the surface” questions being asked about their own or each other’s writing. While I had known about peer writing response groups for years from colleagues at other schools and at workshops, I had not tried using this technique myself. I had always used one-on-one peer critiquing, whole class response, and informal peer response in my class. My question for investigation would be: How would the method I developed of running peer response groups affect their level of critical analysis of writing and their independence and interdependence as writers?

Review of the Literature

Writers’ Workshop has become a fairly common practice in many progressive elementary classrooms. One of the first to document the power of this approach was Donald Graves in Writing: Teachers...
and Children at Work (1983). In this book he examined a variety of classrooms and how they each carried out the writers’ workshop. Lucy Calkins, in Lessons from a Child: On the Teaching and Learning of Writing (1983), also documented this practice in an individual classroom, focusing mostly on the development of a particular child, and she followed up with a how-to book, The Art of Teaching Writing (Calkins, 1994), which explains chapter by chapter different aspects of a writers’ workshop classroom. Nancie Atwell also wrote a popular how-to book based on her experiences using writers’ workshop at the middle school level called In the Middle (Atwell, 1998).

There is very little formal research on this topic, though. In my survey of literature on peer writing response groups with elementary school students, I found only a handful of research articles. Brunjes (1993) did a study with high school students that showed a need for structure modeling and trust. These are themes that will be echoed in my own research, though in different ways. Gere and Stevens’ (1985) study with elementary students looked at the question of whether writing response groups would lead to revision. They found that it did. While their findings are useful to my research, they did not examine the process by which the teachers developed the response groups, which I saw as an essential aspect to my research.

Lensmire (1994) was the one author who was critical of writing response groups. He found that it was a risky and emotionally difficult process for some students. But, as he was examining just one classroom, it is difficult to judge if his findings were specific to the dynamics of that particular classroom, the result of a poorly implemented approach, or a problem in the practice itself.

The closest work to my own was Suzanne Brady and Suzie Jacob’s work, documented in their book, Mindful of Others (1994). They documented the use of peer writing response groups in Brady’s fifth grade classroom and found the process to be very successful. But Brady’s students, unlike mine, were mostly upper middle class white students. A large percentage of her students had strong academic backgrounds. Would this same process work with my low-income Mexican-American students with weaker academic backgrounds?

### An Overview

The original intent of this action research project was to investigate the effectiveness of a particular method of peer writing response groups. I was looking for a way to create a process that would lead to the students being proficient and confident in peer critique of their own writing. While the investigation started out asking the question of whether a particular model for running writers’ workshop and peer response groups would be useful, it ended up focusing more on affective issues. In particular, my research ended up focusing on the issue of student choice and freedom, the affective dimension of the response groups. In other words, I ended up looking at how the group members related to one another and the effect that those relationships had on the functioning of the group.

By the end of the school year we did achieve smoothly running response groups. The groups enjoyed meeting. They were listening to each other’s writing, respecting each other as individuals and as writers. The cooperative groups were cooperating. When I listened to the tapes made of their sessions, virtually all of their conversation was on topic. I had achieved the goal of getting them involved in peer writing response groups. They understood, and were able to do this in a self-directed manner. But it had been a long road getting there. In the fall I had been dealing with groups where students were rude to each other, where there were constant interruptions, and where it was rare to hear any give and take of advice or feedback in a respectful manner. How did this transformation take place? I will outline the process that I started with and then the transformation that this process went through over the course of the school year.

The school I taught in during the year of this investigation is located in a large agricultural town in the central coast area of California, in a low-income neighborhood that is almost exclusively Mexican-American. It is a large elementary school...
of close to 900 students in grades kindergarten through sixth. During the year of this investigation, I taught a fifth/sixth grade class of pre-transitional Spanish core students. There were about 20 sixth graders and 10 fifth graders in my classroom. “Spanish Core” means that all of my students are Spanish speaking, and pre-transitional means that none of them yet meet the district’s requirements for transitioning into English reading and writing. In practice this meant that a large percentage of my students were working at a low academic level.

**Peer Writing Response Groups in Action**

*Initial Attempts or “Plan A”*

My original idea had been to use a fishbowl technique to run the response groups. I developed the idea by modifying a process known as the “Protocol.”¹ In my model, one group of four students would sit in a small circle discussing their writing, while another group of four would sit around them as observers. The job of the group on the outside circle would be to reflect on how well the inside group is accomplishing their task. At the end of the conversation among the inside group, the outside group gives their feedback in the form of praise for what went well, questions, and ideas for improvement. The inside group then gets a chance to discuss the feedback. This was the plan. I knew it would take training to get them to the point where these groups could do this on their own.

What I had noticed in my few past attempts with writing response groups is that the students need a lot of help in learning how to critique writing. I do a fair amount of direct instruction on this topic, but I think direct instruction to teach habits-of-mind—that is, a way of thinking—has its limitations. There is only so much students can learn from lectures. They need to be actively engaged in the process, especially if what they are supposed to be learning is an intellectual process. Also, students can and do learn from each other. Any casual observer notices how children copy each other’s dress, speech, and mannerisms. But they also pick up on how others think. By using a fishbowl technique, where some students are listening in on the discussion of other students, I hypothesized that this would be a way for them to learn from each other and start engaging in this intellectual process. It would be like peer coaching. The group listening in on the response group would have models to observe. The response group could learn from the observations of the group that was listening in on them. As a side benefit, I was also hoping that by having a group listen in I would be more assured of having the response group stay on task. Borrowing an idea from Suzanne Brady, outlined in her book *Mindful of Others,* I decided to tape record the groups to document the process.

About two-thirds of my thirty-plus students during the year of this study had been with me the previous year. The students were already familiar with my method of running writers’ workshops. What would be new for them would be formal writing response groups. The other parts—mini-lessons, writing time, topic selection, drafts, revision, editing, and publication—would be familiar to most of them.

My goal was to have four response groups meeting at a time while each of the remaining four groups would be assigned as observers to each of the response groups. On another day I would switch which would be the response and which would be the observing group. My plan was to meet in this fashion twice a week. This activity would take up our writers’ workshop hour on those days. The process was to go something like this: Response group listens to the story of one of its members; response group responds to said story; observing group shares observations of how the process went with the response group, as illustrated in Figure 1. I wanted the groups to be fairly permanent, so as to

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¹ This school had been part of a state initiative called SB 1274 Restructuring Schools. As part of that initiative the teachers in the schools involved were trained in a process called the Protocol. This process was to be used by the teachers to engage in reflective dialogue about practice among themselves. It was an elaborate multi-stage process of dialogue of which the process used here is an adaptation.
build up a sense of trust and familiarity with each other’s work and styles.

I would need to move there step by step. Before I introduced the response group idea, I got them going on the writers’ workshop model. I started with an autobiographical story and used a whole group process. Part of the purpose was that this would be a “get to know each other” activity. We all shared our first stories with the whole group. For the next assignment, I introduced the practice of author’s chair and, one at a time, the use of praise, questioning for clarification, and suggestions, still in the whole group setting of the author’s chair.

About a month into the school year I started working on teaching them about revising. First I modeled my own story and revised it with them. Next I introduced the fishbowl technique, with me working within the central active group and the rest of the class watching. After a few times doing that, I introduced the response group protocol method.

I tried running two response groups in fishbowl. I picked two groups that were made up of students who had all been with me for a while to be in the fishbowls. I let them decide who would read. Three other groups, equaling twelve students, would watch each of the groups in the fishbowl. The student who volunteered to read in one group was a student who had been with me since 2nd grade, so this was his third year with me. While this student was not a sophisticated writer, he was at least competent and I knew he was comfortable sharing with the class. While I was not as confident with the second group, I trusted that they could handle it as well. The reader in this group was a boy I knew was fairly self-assured. I reviewed the procedures for the response groups: Read story; ask for compliments, questions, and suggestions; author is in charge as facilitator; they should write down suggestions. The observer groups were to act as “flies on the wall” or “spies,” not participating but only watching. At the end, the observer groups would get to respond to the process and to the story.

It went fairly well. I had to remind them of the process several times, but that was to be expected. It was especially difficult for the observing groups to keep to their roles, but mostly they did so. Most of the responses were, as usual, rudimentary or formulaic. The following were typical remarks:

- “I liked the whole story.”
- “I also like where it said they had the parrots.”
- “Your story was very nice, but you should put in more description.”
- “You need to put in more description of your cousins.”

I went back and forth between the groups. I let them end and move into the stage for the observers to respond naturally. They were able to stay on the

2. All student quotations are translated from the Spanish by the author.
task for almost 10 minutes. Would I be able to eventually get them to stay engaged in this process for most of the hour?

A week later I had all four groups going at once on their own, with the other four groups paired up as the observers. I assigned which groups would be observers and which would be responders. As part of my cooperative group strategy, each student is assigned a number within his or her group, from one to four. In the peer response group activity, I used these numbers to assign who would read during a given session. That is, one day the “#1’s” would read. The next time the “#2’s” would read, and continuing this process, we would begin again with “#1” when all had read. I allowed 10 minutes for both the reading and the responses. This time it did not go so well. The following is an excerpt from my journal written the next day:

On Monday I tried four response groups, with the other four groups being the “spies.” I gave ten minutes for the “author” to read the story and get responses. This did not go as well. Some groups, especially Pedro’s group, had a hard time filling up ten minutes. The “spies” had a hard time remembering not to participate in the first part, and the response group had a hard time not responding in the second part (October 20th).

At the time I thought maybe the seating arrangement was part of the problem and looked there for a solution:

One problem might be the set-up as it is difficult to get an actual inside group and outside group. Maybe I should work on seeing if I can’t create this. Maybe the readers on the floor and the spies on chairs around? (October 20th).

In retrospect, I should have realized that what they needed was more practice and guidance before being expected to do this on their own. I was spending most of my time reminding students to stay in their roles and keeping the observer groups on task, as they either wanted to take an active role in the discussion or engage in side conversations.

**Breakdown in Plan A**

We had now been in school for almost three months and I had run the groups three more times. I finally started recording the groups. I thought it was going better: “I feel like they are learning the process but are weak on the content. Need [to listen to] tape to get a better sense of what they are saying (November 10).” I started listening to the tapes during my 40-minute commute to and from work. I got quite a shock! Here is part of my journal entry from right after listening to the tapes for the first time:

I … taped the groups. What I noticed was that very little real discussion was going on. Lots of interrupting, lots of yelling at each other, beginnings of sentences that are then interrupted and never finished. I had a difficult time listening, because it brought up my anger at their behavior (November 16th).

If I listened on my way to work, I would get to school already mad at them for how they had behaved on the tape! After school I just could barely stand to listen to the tape after being worn out from a day of teaching! For example:

Student: For me where it said… [Interruption as she yells at someone]

Example 2:

Student A: Teacher, teacher!
Student B: Enough!

Example 3:

Student C: Stop that!
Student D: I was first.
Student C: No!

Example 4:

Student E: I liked where it said that…
Student F [interrupting]: Hey you, English [laughing]
Student E: I liked it when…
Several students at once, [in a singsong voice, followed by laughter]: I liked it where he went…
Student F: Boogers!
Student G [laughing]: Boogers!

Example 5:
Student H: I think you should put in more description…
Student I: Because…
Student J interrupts rudely.
Student I: Shut up!
Student H: Because if not…

Here is what some said in their own words about the functioning of the groups:

Student B: And then some, some students went to their desks and under the tables.
Student M: I didn’t like that, that they got down and went to their desks [referring to observers leaving their places] and went under the tables.
Student H: And bothered others in the other group.
Student F: I liked it little because some people were fighting, some were reading…

Much of what was disturbing to me can’t be captured easily in quotes, as the students talked over each other, or was captured in the sounds of murmured conversations and laughter going on while others tried to engage in the process. The sounds of background laughter and side conversations that were not about the story were heard on over half of each tape.

I decided this could not continue. I stopped the peer response groups for a while. I got so disheartened that I decided I needed to rethink this activity before we attempted it again. I did not want to completely give up the idea of formal peer response groups, as I still hoped it could work to accomplish the purposes I originally intended. But how to make it work? I considered the idea that maybe what was wrong was my saying to the fishbowl response groups: “I decide who reads, when they read, in the groups that I have selected.”

What I had to confront was an issue of cognitive dissonance—a contradiction between a belief in a democratic classroom with freedom of movement and less teacher control, and my need to control the process and make-up of the response groups in the name of “scaffolding.” I saw that the students needed a lot of guidance in learning how to engage in the kinds of analysis that I was expecting. I interpreted that to mean they would need a very structured approach. I also believed in heterogeneous grouping and knew that, by themselves, most groups would likely not be heterogeneous in either gender or ability. I further justified my strict control because I did not fully trust the students based on what I was experiencing regarding their classroom behavior. But I also saw that it was not working. In fact, I was realizing that maybe my strict control of the process was part of the problem.

Regroup or “Plan B”

In January I brought up my concerns about forming new groups and a new process with the students during class meetings. We finally decided to create new groups by letting the students form themselves into groups of four. While there were concerns over students who might get left out or excluded, and we discussed a number of possible procedures for forming groups, in the end the students took charge and developed a system so that everyone got in a group. They would decide themselves when and who would read for feedback, within the writers’ workshop hour. The fishbowl idea (my original research agenda) was gone. By the beginning of February we were ready to try again. As one can see from Figure 2, the process for the response group is the same, but the observers are gone, as is Step 3, where the observers would be responding.
From this point on I would ask at the beginning of each writers’ workshop session if any group needed to meet as a response group. If so, I would set them up with the tape recorder, and they would find a spot away from the other students to work. They loved the idea of tape recording themselves and always asked with enthusiasm if they could listen to the tape when they were done, which, of course, I allowed them to do.

This method did take care of the most difficult issues that I had been having. The groups appeared to like the idea of meetings. Only very occasionally did I hear a grumble from a student who wanted to write instead of meeting with the group. They really seemed to enjoy both being able to read their stories to their group and listening to each other’s stories. In listening to the tapes, I rarely heard interruptions, and they were mostly for clarification or asking someone to read louder or more clearly. They were good about praising each other. There were almost no cases where I heard “put-downs.” Most groups were probably on task over ninety percent of the time! I was hearing this type of conversations now:

Example 1:
Student S: Do you want help with description, or in what?

Example 2:
Student A: I think if you, you put all the description, emotion, and action and all the description that it will be a really beautiful story. And if you read it like the other time, it is going to be better if you speak loudly, if you speak well, if you know the story by heart.

Example 3
Student M: What I liked about your story is the description because you put a lot of description in the story. You describe the people well.

Example 4:
Student E: I liked it when he saw the wolf and the animals and then went with them and they fought. And you?

End of conversation.

As we see from these examples, though, the quality of the responses was not very high. Often all there would be was praise, everyone saying which part of the story they liked best. Sometimes they would
jump right into suggestions which were mostly of the overly general form (i.e., “Add more details”) or the opposite, overly specific about relatively unimportant details (i.e., “What was the dog’s name” or “What color eyes did he have”). Only infrequently did I hear conversations that went beyond the superficial. I did not notice any consistent change in the three or four months we had left in the school year in the quality of the conversations I recorded.

What I really noticed missing was authentic dialogue among the students. While they did not always stick to all the steps of the formula, the questions and answers had a formulaic sound to them. The conversations did not sound authentic. It was as if, “We’re supposed to suggest ideas for adding emotion, action, and details to the story, so we will ask for them.” It did not sound as if what they were asking were things they cared about, or as if they had any real sense that these would improve the story. The authors did not sound like they were really interested in the suggestions they were hearing. Everybody was going through the motions. They enjoyed hearing each other’s stories, and the authors liked having an audience for the most part, but they had not taken ownership of the idea of revision. While I felt successful regarding the affective aspect and that they had learned the process, the question remains: why such limited success in the intellectual quality?

**Discussion**

In *Mindful of Others* (Brady & Jacobs, 1994) the assumption is that children learn from each other in social settings. I strongly agree. The assumption is that those students who are more adept at the types of dialogue and critique expected will serve as models, attainable models, for the other students. One hypothesis for why this didn’t work in my class is that, unlike Brady’s students where a good percentage come from well educated homes, my students come from families where the parents have mostly had limited schooling. Many of the parents are only semi-literate. Also, because of my class make-up, most of my students have experienced low academic achievement. In this setting the students may not have any models among themselves of the kind of dialog expected of them; a case of the blind leading the blind. Therefore, they would need much more scaffolding from the teacher and a longer time in which to learn the type of language and dialogue that takes place in a sophisticated writing response group.

Another aspect may be the lack of connection that students see between school and “life.” Again, in middle class culture, the gap between the culture of the school and the culture of the home is not so wide. The kinds of talk, the kinds of ideas that are considered important, the language, are much more similar. The connection between what happens in the classroom and their life outside the classroom does not seem as remote (Lessow-Hurley, 2000). Maybe what is needed is more work making that connection explicit and authentic. A more authentic purpose for the writing beyond our class books may have been what was needed to motivate students to revise. Just each other and myself may not have been a real enough audience or purpose to have a reason to improve what they had to say or how they said it.

A further possibility is that I should be satisfied with what is going on in the groups. They are writing a lot. They are enjoying, and are motivated by, sharing their stories. They are learning some of the procedures and the processes of a response group. Hopefully this is planting a seed in their heads for the future, both in terms of the idea of using others to improve one’s writing, and in terms of some of the language and issues for analyzing a story. It could be that the amount of time spent on this process was not enough to get further than we did.

The successful lesson for me as their teacher is that students need to be in charge of their learning process. In the beginning, the process was mine. I had a certain idea that I wanted the students to carry out. It was my curriculum, my plan, and my method. They were the subjects on which I was going to carry out my investigation. They resisted that role, which in hindsight is not so surprising. It was not until I let them share control of the process
that the response groups were able to function productively. It was when we, as a class, developed a new process—a process that gave them more control over the important aspects that most directly affected them—that it could work. Once they could choose who they would work with and choose when they were ready to share their work, they were willing to take part in the activity in a positive way.

Conclusions

There are several implications from this investigation for the classroom teacher. On the one hand we want our students to develop certain habits of mind, certain intellectual abilities. In this investigation those centered on the critique of their writing. For many students that takes explicit guidance. This is especially true for those students who are not exposed to these activities outside of school. We also want students to develop the ability to work independently and cooperatively. Therefore, the question arises of how to offer close guidance in developing the intellectual abilities desired and the social abilities mentioned without undermining the independence we are trying to develop and nurture. My tentative answer comes from the idea of scaffolding. What I mean by scaffolding here is that the teacher works closely with the students, engaging in the target activities with them. At first the teacher plays a more active role in the activities and slowly weans herself or himself away. This does not take a highly controlled external structure to implement. The students can be involved in cooperative and independent activities while the teacher works with them and different levels of guidance. While this might mean more whole class instruction at first, it mostly means lots of small group work and coaching.

In light of this investigation and the above conclusions, what will I do differently? For one, I will put more thought into how the groups are formed, seeing the importance of self selection and letting students take more control of the process. I need to include the students from the beginning in developing the method that we will use for our writers' workshop and response groups. I also think that there needs to be more modeling by me, moving through the process slower. I will join the groups more regularly before having them work on their own, acting first as a facilitator and then as an observer, before pulling out almost entirely from the group. I will also write more regularly in front of the students, modeling my writing process out loud for them to see and hear. In this way they get constant exposure to an adult model of the types of thought processes I am hoping they learn. I also will look for authentic writing activities and purposes that move beyond the classroom, which may motivate students to revise as they see a larger audience who will read their work and that their writing can have an impact beyond the school walls.

Developing students’ independence, cooperation, and intellectual abilities in the classroom takes constant reflection by the practitioner and constant development of one’s program. I hope that this investigation sheds some light on the question of how to carry out this type of education more effectively.

References


Nicholas Meier spent fourteen years as a bilingual elementary school teacher in the central coast area of California, having worked at various time in grades first through sixth. He is a fellow of the Central Coast Writing Project, which he credits as one of the most powerful professional development experiences of his career. He has recently returned to being a full time student to pursue a doctorate in education at Stanford University. Nicholas also currently teaches as a lecturer in the teacher credentialing program at San Jose State University.