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# Peer Response Practices Among Writers in a First-Year Residence Hall: An Ethnographic Study

Nicole Kraemer Munday
*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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PEER RESPONSE PRACTICES AMONG WRITERS

IN A FIRST-YEAR RESIDENCE HALL:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Nicole Kraemer Munday

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English


We hereby approve the dissertation of


Nicole Kraemer Munday


Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy


October 29, 2007                          Signature on file
_____                       _____
                                          Dr. Bennett A. Rafoth
                                          Professor of English, Advisor


October 29, 2007                          Signature on file
_____                       _____
                                          Dr. Nancy Hayward
                                          Professor of English


October 29, 2007                          Signature on file
_____                       _____
                                          Dr. Michael M. Williamson
                                          Professor of English


ACCEPTED

Signature on file                         November 16, 2007
_____           _____
Dr. Michele S. Schwietz
Associate Dean for Research
The School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title:   Peer Response Practices Among Writers in a First-
         Year Residence Hall: An Ethnographic Study

Author:   Nicole Kraemer Munday

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Bennett A. Rafoth

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Nancy Hayward
                                Dr. Michael M. Williamson

This ethnographic study examines peer response sessions among writers in a first-year residence hall. It explores how students practice extracurricular peer response and investigates the ways in which extracurricular peer response differs from traditional classroom peer response.

Because capturing peer response sessions occurring in a residence hall presents unique problems of access, the study's research design includes the use of trained student recorders — first-year students residing in the research site who observed and recorded the peer response sessions of their fellow hallmates.

In addition to the observation notes generated from these student recorders, other data included the documents generated by the peer response partners, transcribed tape recordings of their sessions, and

transcribed tape recordings of follow-up interviews. The data was analyzed and consolidated through a coding process and the selection of critical incidents.

An analysis of 10 peer response sessions revealed some differences between extracurricular and classroom peer response practices. The results showed that students preferred working in a technology-rich environment and that they frequently engaged in bonding behavior during their peer response sessions.

Participants' emphasis on forming rapport with their peer response partners suggests that strong social connections are an important part of students' ideologies of peer response. Furthermore, the study confirmed that students are able to conduct effective peer response sessions autonomously in an extracurricular setting.

The study indicates that composition teachers who employ peer response pedagogy should incorporate community-building exercises in their writing classes, and that these teachers should then allow students greater freedom in the selection of classroom peer response partners in order to facilitate strong social connections among peer response partners.

Also, the study indicates that writing center administrators should attempt to improve social connections between writers and peer tutors, design writing center spaces where students can work in a technology-rich setting, and establish satellite centers in student residence halls, to the extent that all three of these suggestions make sense within the local context of each writing center.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview of the Study Design

This study is an ethnography of peer response practices occurring among writers in a first-year residence hall. The questions I explore include the following: How do first-year students experience peer response in residence halls? Whom do they turn to for help and what kind of help do they get? How do peer response sessions in the residence halls differ from more traditional peer response sessions held during class?

To capture this behavior in as naturalistic a way as possible, I trained student recorders to observe and record the proceedings of these peer response sessions. The student recorders were drawn from those students who lived in the hall being studied.

In addition to the notes generated from these student recorders, other data samples included the documents generated by the peer response partners, transcribed tape recordings of their sessions, and transcribed tape recordings of follow-up interviews. The data was summarized, and throughout the course of the study — approximately one academic school year — I selected several

critical incidents to examine in-depth in a narrative style. Through these critical incidents, I present a more contextualized understanding of the peer response practices first-year students engage in within their residence halls. When composition teachers have a better understanding of the types of peer response practices students engage in voluntarily — on their own time and in their own space — perhaps we will have a better understanding of how those students interpret the peer response instruction we give them in class.

## Significance for the Field

The recognition that knowledge is socially constructed is a cornerstone of current composition theory (Berlin, 1988/1997; Bruffee, 1984/1997; Vygotsky, 1934/1986). Unlike Piaget's egocentric child, who "speaks only about himself, but chiefly because he does not attempt to place himself at the point of view of his hearer" (as cited in Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 26), composition teachers expect college writers to consider their audience's needs by situating themselves in a larger community of learners and readers. Often, teachers use classroom peer response to demonstrate the synergy created when a community of writers gathers to consider one another's words.

Social construction of knowledge is vital because it allows humans to draw on one another's experiences and acquired learning; the shared process also grants opportunities to test out theories and complicate one's ideas rather than hold onto them rigidly. Piaget comments on the necessity of collaboratively examining our views:

> We are constantly hatching an enormous number of false ideas, conceits, Utopias, mystical explanations, suspicions, and megalomaniac fantasies, which disappear when brought into contact with other people. The social need to share the thought of others and to communicate our own with success is at the root of our need for verification. (as cited in Vygotsky, 1934/1986, p. 48)

This "social need" provides the impetus for writers to seek out reader feedback through peer response. As writers test the content of their ideas and the effectiveness of the rhetorical strategies used to express those ideas, they initiate a collaborative process. And an important byproduct of this collaboration is the social construction of knowledge *about writing*.

Various scholars have grappled with finding precise ways to discuss how students form their socially constructed views about writing. In particular, there has been much debate (J. Harris, 1997; Rafoth, 1988) about the accuracy of applying the terms speech community, interpretive community, discourse community, or community

of practice to activities student writers undertake. J.

Harris (1997) classifies interpretive communities and

speech communities by size, as he says that interpretive

communities are "loose dispersed network[s] of individuals"

while speech communities "refer more specifically to

groupings like neighborhoods, settlements, or classrooms"

(p. 14). He notes that discourse communities are more in

line with "ghostly" interpretive communities, suggesting

that both these terms are too vague to be meaningful (p.

15).

Rubin (1988) avoids the semantic wrangling over these

three terms while managing to classify the "social

dimensions of writing" into the following categories:

> (1) Writers construct mental representations of the
> social contexts in which their writing is embedded;
> (2) Writing as a social process or system can create
> or constitute social contexts; (3) Writers — in some
> senses all writers — create texts collectively with
> other participants in discourse communities; (4)
> Writers assign consensual values to writing and thus
> construct a dimension of social meaning. (p. 2)

Rubin's third category — the collaborative nature of

textual production — is most closely related to peer

response practices, particularly since he subdivides this

category to discuss writers' use of "consultants and

informants" throughout the writing process (p. 17).

Unfortunately, Rubin excludes peer response practices from his last category, for it would be useful to discuss peer response in terms of "assign[ing] consensual values to writing" (p. 2). A key component of peer response is the collaborative negotiation over what qualifies as "good" writing and effective communication. To get at the collaborative evaluation component of peer response, perhaps it is most useful to think of peer responders as members of a community of practice.

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a community of practice as a group of individuals, gathered because of a set of shared interests, who exchange information with one another on an ongoing basis; through this participatory process, the community establishes a fluid mode of collaborative learning.

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) continue to refine the notion of communities of practice as an educational theory. They explain the trajectory of a community of practice: "As [the members] spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5). For members of a

community of practice, language is central to their work;
it is through language that a community of practice
formulates its knowledge and its values (Lave & Wenger,
1991).

Peer response partners could be said to operate as
members in a community of practice for a number of reasons.
First, the process of peer response is embedded in social
dialogue, so language plays a primary role, just as it does
within a community of practice. Second, responders offer
feedback to writers, providing the "sounding board"
function described by Wenger et al. (2002). Lastly, peer
response partners come together with a shared purpose: to
talk about writing with a focus on a particular text.

Through language, peer response partners, operating in
a community of practice, forge a mutual understanding of
how to write clear and effective prose and what features a
reader-oriented text might possess. This understanding,
however, is provisional and dependent on the context of
each writing assignment.

Berlin (1988/1997), relying on the work of Marxist
sociologist Göran Therborn, discusses the instability of
socially constructed value systems. He notes that
ideologies, which are "transmitted through language" (p.
681) are constantly being revised. Similarly, every time

peer response partners meet, they re-evaluate, through dialogue, their shared values about writing. Peer responders (whether a group or a pair) construct their writing ideologies by considering Therborn's three questions: "What exists? What is good? What is possible?" (as cited in Berlin p. 681). That is, peer responders must evaluate the following: the content of the ideas presented ("What exists?"); whether the text rhetorically achieves the author's desired effect on the reader ("What is good?"); and which revision strategies the author might employ to improve the overall quality of the piece ("What is possible?").

At the same time students are busy establishing their ideologies about writing and responding during collaborative work, teachers are forming ideologies also, and problems emerge when teacher and student ideologies about "good" writing and "effective" peer response clash. Since teacher ideologies about writing and responding can become a "terministic screen," obscuring the possibilities that divergent ideologies might exist, composition teachers have a special duty to try to understand the ideologies students carry with them into the writing classroom. Highberg, Moss, & Nicolas (2004) note the role that context

plays on writing group practices:

> Every writing group is a socially constructed entity
> with language at its core, and through the process of
> interacting, each group influences the writing of its
> members. These constraints as well as the uniqueness
> of each group are important sites of scholarly inquiry
> that, when investigated, can provide insight, for
> teachers, writing center staff, and group members,
> into making writing groups maximally effective in
> whatever context they operate. (p. 2)

Their words serve as a reminder to teachers to pay
attention to the "who" and "where" aspects of writing
groups inside and outside the classroom. In 1975, Britton,
Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen further cemented the
connection between good teaching and understanding the
context behind which student texts are written. They argue
that teachers' "involvement with all the learning processes
of their pupils requires that they understand how something
came to be written, not just what is written" (p. 21). As
we will see, college composition teachers have paid little
attention for too long to the context behind peer response
practices in the places where students live.

## Significance of the Study

There is general consensus among current composition
scholars that peer response is a worthwhile pedagogical
process. It is done in writing classrooms through a variety
of formats — dyads (Herrington & Cadman, 1991), small

groups (Brooke, Mirtz, & Evans, 1994; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001), and class workshops (Bishop, 2001; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998). Peer response also serves as the foundation of the writing center movement. But we know that peer response occurs in many other places outside the confines of the classroom or the writing center. In fact, teachers often encourage students to seek help from a trustworthy peer — especially during the later revision stages — so that student writers can solicit feedback from a "real reader" (Elbow, 1998) or so they can get editing and proofreading assistance (Elbow, 1999). Anecdotally, we know that our students show drafts to their roommates, English-major friends, teammates, and family members. We know that Emig (1971) began talking about the role of "interveners" more than 30 years ago when she noted that "parents," "siblings," and "friends" sometimes played a role in the pre-writing activities of the twelfth grade students she studied (p. 34). And Macrorie (1984), in his lead-in to introducing "the helping circle," also notes that writers often share their work with "a friend or member of the family" (p. 84).

Despite the recognition that peer response frequently occurs beyond our classroom walls, very little peer response research has been done outside of traditional

classrooms or writing centers. After a comprehensive literary review, I have not found any evidence of a study that has looked at the peer response practices of college students in their home settings, though several scholars have called for such research to be done. M. Harris (1992) says:

> Perhaps the least studied of the widespread uses of collaboration in writing groups is that informal network of assistance and support that goes on in residence halls, study rooms, coffee shops, libraries, and faculty offices — where peers help each other by reading each other's drafts when asked. (p. 370)

Gere (1994/2001), a leader in peer response and writing group research, scolds her fellow compositionists, saying, "In concentrating upon establishing our position within the academy, we have neglected to recount the history of composition in other contexts; we have neglected composition's extracurriculum" (p. 278).

A few scholars, however, have tried to move peer response studies outside the confines of the composition classroom. Berkenkotter (1984) invited 10 of her students to record think-aloud protocols as their group responded to one another's essays, presumably in a laboratory setting. Berkenkotter's study is useful in highlighting ways students' personalities and internal conflicts sometimes inhibit their ability to accept peer response criticism. As

Berkenkotter profiles two students, Stan and Joann, she also offers insight into why some students are resistant to peer response and others are too eager to incorporate peer feedback into their revisions uncritically.

But her study would have gone much further to answer the important question she poses, "How do students interact in their writing groups when the teacher isn't there?" (p. 312), if the writing group she studied had been truly autonomous. Perhaps her student writing group could have enjoyed greater autonomy had the students (1) not been her own, (2) been able to select their group members independently, and (3) met voluntarily on their own time and in their own space. Berkenkotter's question about student writing group performance without the influence of a teacher is a critical one, but it is perhaps best taken up through a naturalistic study in a place like a university residence hall.

More recently, Highberg, Moss, and Nicolas (2004) compiled the anthology *Writing groups inside and outside the classroom*, and in their introduction, they declare they did so to acknowledge the prevalence of writing groups meeting "outside the classroom, sometimes on campus but more often off campus at coffee shops, fast food restaurants, or other student hangouts" (p. 6). This

anthology does much to emphasize the social context of writing groups, particularly the often nurturing relationships that develop among writers and responders. Unfortunately, an important "student hangout" Highberg, Moss, and Nicolas do not address is a place where many students spend the most time — their residence hall.

Yes, there is a dearth of research that has been done on peer response practices outside the classroom, particularly in the residence halls. But as M. Harris (1992) suggests, just because this type of peer response has been hidden to writing teachers, it doesn't mean it isn't happening and isn't going to continue to happen. Bruffee (1984/1995) reminds us that "the fact is that people have always learned from their peers and doggedly persist in doing so, whether we professional teachers and educators take a hand in it or not" (p. 97). This dissertation study opens the discussion so that professional teachers and educators may explore how students develop peer response practices and ideologies while working in the residence halls with their peers.

When first-year students arrive on campus, they are immersed in college writing for the first time. For the most part, the writing they do outside the classroom is a mystery to their teachers. As Sommers and Saltz (2004)

point out, "what is missing from so many discussions about college writing is the experience of students" (p. 125). When we tell our students to look over their classmates' papers, how do they interpret our words? Is their definition of "peer response" the same as ours, and if not, how does it differ?

Writing teachers have little context as to how student papers evolve from the time they leave our classrooms to the time we read their next draft (Sommers & Saltz, 2004, p. 126). It would be useful to know what kinds of collaborative help students receive on their papers, and one way to study this is to look at peer response practices in the residence halls.

Heath (1983) and Cushman (1998) have demonstrated the importance of studying the literacy practices of people within the context of their homes and communities because these practices often differ from those displayed in school settings. The thick description provided by Hersch (1998), Kidder (1989), Moffatt (1989), and many others has added to our understanding of the way students' social lives affect their learning processes. When teachers gain insight into the "underlife" of their students, they can better adjust to meet students' instructional needs (Anderson, Best, Black, Hurst, Miller, & Miller, 1990).

This study also helps teachers' understanding of student peer response practices in another key respect: it provides the means to investigate whether students and teachers understand the vocabulary of peer response in the same way. In past research, compositionists have found a disconnect between the way teachers and students understand the metalanguage we use to discuss writing; this is particularly true when confronting the evaluation of student writing. Moffett (1968) observes that students respond to one another's writing using "their own terms," while teachers use specialized terms that focus on technique (p. 194). Butler (1981/1987) found that his basic writing students never saw the hundreds of "silent evaluations" that occurred as he read each of their papers. And when he recorded some of these evaluations, they showed up as "no more than horizontal lines across the paper" (p. 558). While Butler's comments were meaningful to him, he admits that they remained "no more than a puzzle" for his students (p. 558).

Similarly, when Newkirk (1984) compared teacher judgments to student judgments of a stack of student essays, he found that students and teachers employ different standards when they judge first-year essays. Students put a premium on creativity, while teachers

focused on the depth of ideas being presented. Newkirk illustrated that teachers and students often mean very different things when they talk about what qualifies a piece of writing as particularly "good" or "bad."

Peer response research from the late 1960s through the 1980s (Berkenkotter, 1984; Butler, 1981/1987; George, 1984; Gere, 1985; Moffett, 1968; Newkirk, 1984) attempted to identify and categorize the moves of writers and responders engaged in peer response; the work of these researchers furthered our relative understanding of peer response as a process. However, the research on peer response has not been concluded. Now the field of composition has placed a greater emphasis on reflecting the contextualized nature of peer response (Boquet, 2002; M. Harris, 1993; Highberg, Moss, & Nicolas, 2004; Ritter, 2000; Spear, 1993a; Tobin, 1993). This study seeks to extend the scholarly conversation about peer response to another context – that of a first-year residence hall.

Since one of the major benefits of peer response is that it empowers students by putting them in charge of their own learning, then it seems that peer response sessions occurring outside the purview of a teacher's watchful eye might be considered peer response in its purest form. For one thing, it is truly voluntary. Plus,

without the presence of the teacher or other class members,

there may be less of a performance aspect if student

writers feel that the response session is just for their

own benefit, rather than for proving that they are engaged

in class activities because they want a higher

participation grade.

Perhaps we can discover students' peer response

ideologies by listening to them conduct sessions when their

teachers are not there. It is in their private settings,

such as their residence halls, where we are most likely to

hear students using their own peer response language and

defining their own goals for the session. Then, for the

first time, we will gain some insight into their hidden

world of extracurricular peer response, and we will be able

to assess whether there are any marked differences between

the peer response ideologies of teachers vs. those of

students.


Peer Response Defined

for the Purpose of this Study

Peer response is a highly situational, collaborative

process, with few common elements defining it. There is as

much variety in peer response sessions as there is variety

in temperaments, academic training, and academic

constraints within the student population. The way in which
the writer and responder proceed with the session has to be
established and negotiated between the two parties
(especially for extracurricular peer response sessions,
which are truly autonomous and without teacher-imposed
guidelines). For example, writers and responders must
negotiate their own level of involvement during the
feedback portion of the session. Some peer response
partners may choose to discuss the responder's impression
of the paper, asking one another follow-up questions to
elicit a clarification, or arguing the benefits and/or
disadvantages of a particular rhetorical or grammatical
choice. Other peer response partners may adopt more
hierarchical roles, where one partner acts as a tutor and
the other as a tutee; in this case, one partner may offer
comments that inform and direct, while the other partner
listens passively. Also, writer and responders can switch
roles throughout the session.

Furthermore, for the purpose of this study, peer
response is defined as a dialogic, social process, one that
takes focuses on the collaborative moment between writer
and responder and excludes any consideration of how a
responder's feedback influences (or does not influence) the
writer's revisions. This limited definition of peer

response recognizes that the process of peer response is valuable in and of itself as a knowledge-making and metacognitive activity, and it acknowledges the complexity involved in the revision process, when writers must decide which peer response feedback they should follow and which feedback they should ignore. Although some scholars consider classroom peer response as a tool to achieve improved student texts (Bouton & Tutty, 1975; Wagner, 1975) this study rejects a product-driven use of peer response.

## Effective Peer Response Defined
## for the Purpose of this Study

Building on the general definition of peer response I have provided above, I am defining effective peer response as those sessions characterized by high degrees of collaboration, authorial control, and social connection between participants.

Peer response sessions with high degrees of collaboration between participants include a balance of Informing, Directing, and Eliciting comments uttered by both writers and responders. Typically, peer response partners who achieve a high degree of collaboration resist taking on hierarchical roles during their sessions, and so these writers and responders act as co-learners in the

social construction of knowledge. Sessions where the writer

shows a high degree of authorial control are those in which

writers remain actively engaged throughout, tending to make

more Eliciting comments than their counterparts engaging in

less effective peer response. Finally, peer response

partners who share a strong social connection have

established a sense of trust and rapport, which is

typically manifested through bonding behavior. Although

bonding behavior may give the appearance of informality,

the work accomplished during sessions in which participants

have strong social connections is no less serious than the

work of participants who are more socially detached.

## Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, the driving questions of this

study involve the basic procedures first-year students

employ during peer response sessions in residence halls:

what patterns will emerge when first-year students reveal

in their own words, on their own time, and in their own

place, how they experience peer response in its purest

form?

There is also a comparative aspect of this study that

looks at the differences and similarities between more

traditional peer response sessions held during class and

peer response sessions occurring in the residence halls.
When we tell our students to look over their classmates'
papers, how do they interpret our words once they are in
completely voluntary and autonomous peer response groups?

As I grapple with the answers to these questions in
Chapters IV and V, one of the main themes that will emerge
is the importance students place on forming social
connections with one another during peer response, a
finding that suggests that student and teacher ideologies
of peer response do indeed differ.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Review of Literature

When exploring peer response, it was important for me to consider the phenomenon broadly because prior to the study, it remained unclear whether peer response in a residence hall would look like peer response in school settings, and if it did, to what degree. Therefore, I focused on Gere's (1987) monograph *Writing groups: History, theory, and implications,* which is widely considered to be a pivotal source on writing groups, peer response, and peer tutoring. I used Gere's chronological reference list as a springboard for finding other key sources, starting my review in 1966 with the Dartmouth Seminar and working forward to the present.

In addition, I searched the MLA Directory of Periodicals, MLA International Bibliography, and Dissertations Abstract International, using the keyword "peer response." Since other disciplines do not use the term "peer response" as consistently as does the field of composition, I expanded my search terms when I looked at databases such as JSTOR, Psych INFO, and Sociological Abstracts. For these databases, I experimented with

combinations of a number of terms, including: "peer response," "dormitory," "writing," "college," and "academic." Finally, at the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Antonio, Texas, I visited the publisher displays at each of the scholarly presses to scan their book lists and their shelves, looking for titles that suggested which books might focus on peer response or writing groups.

## Theories of Peer Response

Though Gere (1987) notes that peer response can be traced back as early as the writing groups of colonial America, peer response was not popularized as a teaching technique until the dawn of the process movement, a time typically marked by the convening of American and British writing teachers at the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar. Moffett (1968) and Murray (1968) introduced the benefits of peer response two years later, and then following Elbow's germinal work (1973) *Writing without teachers,* there was a large boom in peer response and writing group literature during the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s.

One explanation for why the process movement progressed along a parallel course with the peer response movement is that, in some ways, process-oriented teaching

made the workload more intense, and literature on peer response reflected a growing attitude that peer response offers a solution to save teachers time. When composition teachers began focusing more on content and embraced the idea that students gain writing fluency and revision skills upon writing multiple drafts, the amount of time teachers spent evaluating these drafts increased tremendously. It took much longer to make inferences about students' intended meanings and to diagnose writers' recurring patterns of error — to teach according to more holistic evaluative approaches advocated by Bartholomae (1985/1997), Perl (1979/1997), and Shaughnessy (1977) — than it did to mark up each individual grammar error with a red pen.

In the 1970s, we begin to see peer response promoted as a handy technique, a shortcut even, that overworked teachers could use to manage class time more efficiently. Wagner (1975), in an essay which is tellingly entitled "How to Avoid Grading Compositions," concedes that students need to write numerous papers throughout the semester for their writing to improve and their motivation to be maintained. But she describes the grading of those papers as "dull, frustrating" and "drudgery" (p. 76). Her answer to this dilemma is for students to grade one another's papers, and though Wagner never uses the term "peer response," the

process she describes clearly qualifies as such. She briefly acknowledges the educational value of having students evaluate one another's work, saying, "students can learn a great deal from each other. Individually or in groups, they can offer praise and suggestions to other student writers" (p. 78). But in the context of her argument, which is predicated on ways teachers can "avoid grading compositions," she shows minimal appreciation of peer response as a process for students to construct knowledge about writing.

Wagner is not alone, however. Bouton and Tutty (1975), building on Wagner's work, investigate whether there is any marked differences in student writing abilities when teachers rather than peers evaluate student texts. In their study, an experienced teacher used her expertise to evaluate students' papers, responding to them with a traditional system of marginal comments and a letter-grade designation; this represented the control group. For the experimental group, the students' classmates evaluated the papers using a well-defined rubric that focused on sentence variation, sentence cohesion, and grammatical correctness (p. 67). Bouton and Tutty's results showed that the experimental group did better than the control group in

every category of the post-test. Because of the peer

evaluators' apparent success, Bouton and Tutty conclude:

> Why then should the teacher spend hours of frustration
> poring over students' papers when the time could be
> spent more effectively in some other area? For
> example, during this test the teacher-corrector spent
> an average three and one-half hours on one set of
> thirty papers. Multiply this by the normal class load
> of an English teacher and the time spent marking and
> grading becomes outrageously high. This figure becomes
> even more ridiculous when we examine the little effect
> that the teachers' corrections have on the overall
> improvement of the students' writing. (pp. 66-67)

Surely, many can sympathize with the extraordinary demands

on teachers' time. But efficiency is not the standard by

which to judge the best teaching practices for the writing

classroom. If peer response is a valuable enterprise, we

should do it for its own sake, not as a shortcut to pawn

work off on our students.

Furthermore, much of the discussion regarding peer

response as a time-saving technique assumes that student

writing is deficient and that the purpose of peer response

is to teach students to "fix" their writing so they can

turn in more polished, correct drafts to their teachers for

evaluation. This is an unfortunate way to view the goal of

peer response because it implies the commodification of

peer response; it suggests that peer response is effective

only if students turn in an improved draft after receiving

feedback from their peers. Bouton and Tutty (1975) and

Wagner (1975) fail to see peer response as a meaningful
knowledge-making activity; instead, they see it as a means
for students to achieve a better written product. Those who
celebrate peer response as a time-saving activity are not
the only ones, however, who overlook the significant
educational value inherent in the process of talking about
writing with one's peers. As we will see later, teachers
who try to micromanage their classroom peer response groups
also reveal a product-driven orientation because they lack
faith that the processes of autonomous writing groups are
valuable in and of themselves.

On the other side of the spectrum, Gere (1987) offers
a more comprehensive view of peer response; she defines it
as a dynamic process in which knowledge is socially
constructed. Gere says, "The product of writing groups, the
polished prose, has importance, but even more significant
is the process of the group, the means by which individuals
experience and eventually become part of a literate
community" (p. 123). Similarly, Spear (1993a) says the high
school teachers who contributed to her anthology, *Peer
response groups in action,* "talk about themselves and their
students in the process of becoming effective users of
language, and they define language in its most
comprehensive social context of discovering, expressing,

and negotiating meaning and relationships" (p. 4). Note the words both Gere and Spear employ here as they discuss peer response, words such as "process," "community," and "relationships." Gere and Spear concede that the value of peer response should not be defined as an either-or, product vs. process debate, but they suggest that the social processes of peer response clearly outweigh any immediate skill-building benefits.

Other compositionists also discuss peer response in terms of a social process. Elbow (1998) says that writers move outside of their own experiences when they (1) solicit readers' genuine reaction to a text (here he applies his concept of listening to readers' "movies of the mind"), and (2) engage in debate with others, thus testing the strength of ideas that may later turn up in writing (here he encourages readers and writers to play his "Doubting and Believing Game"). Elbow's concept of the interplay between peer response and revision is not a matter of peer responders fixing surface level issues like proper comma usage or verb tense; instead, he sees peer response as a collaborative discussion that prompts writers to radically "re-see" their own papers. The ability to "re-see" one's own paper comes from the opportunity for writers to see their words through the lens of a real reader.

Through his theory on the zone of proximal development, Vygotsky (1934/1986) offers the promise that students working together can complement one another's strengths and ameliorate one another's weaknesses. Vygotsky's research reveals that children at the same age can reside in different zones of proximal development (p. 187); he also notes that by imitating adults, children can achieve more advanced cognitive functions than by working in isolation. Therefore, it stands to reason that college students working in peer response groups will operate in different zones of proximal development, and by working collaboratively and by imitating one another's writing strategies, they will be able to help one another think about writing in more advanced ways. This is an important connection because Vygotsky confirms collaboration as a necessary ingredient for improvement; the zone of proximal development does not work if writers fail to come into social contact with one another.

Vygotsky offers an almost poetic summary of the value of peer response as a social process as he writes, "What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow" (p. 188). Through today's collaboration, student writers become better revisers tomorrow; therefore, the

social process of peer response often has a fortuitous effect on students' written products.

In the debate over peer response as a work-saving technique or a social constructivist process, peer response has to be viewed in the larger sense, because if it wasn't a worthwhile process, why would writers appropriate it for their own use once they got away from their teachers' glance? As Bruffee (1984/1995) notes, "the fact is that people have always learned from their peers and doggedly persist in doing so, whether we professional teachers and educators take a hand in it or not" (p. 97). This dogged persistence to learn from one's peers shows up when students voluntarily visit the Writing Center and when they seek help from their friends and family members at home. We have a significant body of research about the social interactions occurring in classrooms and in writing centers, but what we are lacking is information about the peer response sessions occurring in our students' homes.

*What We Know About Peer Response*

*Through Classroom-Based Research*

In the past three decades, composition researchers have amassed a solid body of literature regarding peer response practices found in the classroom through a

collection of qualitative and quantitative studies, and teacher lore, which has been passed on. This information offers insight as to teachers' deeply held peer response ideologies — what they think student goals should be and specifically what students ought to be doing as they respond.

Compositionists note that there are a number of effective peer response formats: dyads (Herrington & Cadman, 1991), small groups (Brooke, Mirtz, & Evans, 1994; Gere & Stevens, 1985; Macrorie, 1984; McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001), and class workshops (Bishop, 2001; Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998). There is also a wide variety of feedback methods peer responders can employ, including the use of checklists (Bouton & Tutty, 1975), detailed written critiques (Herrington & Cadman, 1991), letters (He, 1993), and a wide variety of electronic means (Barker & Kemp, 1990; Mauriello, 2000). Some teachers let students choose the people they want to work with (Beaven, 1977; Styslinger, 1999); other teachers put the groups together themselves (George, 1984; Jackson, 2004; Kraemer, 1993; Reimer, 1993). Still others require students to remove their names from their papers, to allow writers a sense of anonymity as their work is critiqued by the class (Bellas, 1970; Putz, 1970; Reimer, 1993). While there are a number of peer response options teachers will accept as

useful, there are a few core elements teachers describe as necessary to fulfill their peer response ideals. In simplest terms, these principles are as follows:

>  (1)  Good peer response leads to effective revision.
>  Effective revision means the writer has improved the
>  text significantly (as far as content, organization,
>  rhetorical strategies, grammar).
>
>  (2)  Good peer response allows writers to exercise
>  authorial control.

Each of these teacher assumptions about effective peer response practices now will be examined individually.

Several studies argue that peer response makes students more competent revisers by increasing their powers of detection and diagnosis (Flower, Hayes, Carey, Schriver, & Stratman, 1986; Macrorie, 1984; Murray, 1968; Strout, 1970). The rationale is that when students act as responsive readers and practice judging the effectiveness of someone else's prose, their skills of detection and diagnosis are sharpened, so they are in a better position to judge the effectiveness of their own prose. Murray (1968; chap. 27) suggests teachers have a moral responsibility to increase students' self-diagnostic skills because students will eventually graduate and be expected to perform independently in the workplace; one way students

can become better diagnosticians is to engage in peer
response. He says, "By attempting to help others they will
develop the vital ability to edit, to diagnose and solve
writing problems. As they develop this ability on other
papers they will begin to develop it on their own" (p.
131). Furthermore, Murray notes that when writers are
exposed to the works of their peers, through observation
they are able to expand the number of tools in their
"rhetorical toolbox" (p. 73).

Flower et al. (1986) also explain the importance of
developing diagnosis and detection among student writers.
Flower et al. say that unless student writers can define a
hierarchy of revision needs and create a plan for how to
address these needs (something expert writers do
regularly), students approach the task as the basic writers
in Sommers' study (1980/1997) did — they "faced revision
like the grim reaper, prepared to tramp through a text
cutting and 'slashing out.' The goal, as Flower et al.
(1986) describe it, is to fix errors rather than rethink;
the primary tool is deletion" (p. 17). In contrast, peer
response practices described by classroom teachers show
that peer groups *are* prompting student writers to rethink
their drafts in meaningful ways.

Strout (1970) describes in rich detail some of the issues her tenth grade students tackle in their writing workshops. She reports that her student Ray, who wrote an essay evaluating the school library, will distribute his draft to his classmates tomorrow. Strout forecasts that "candidly and specifically, they would let him know if he were clear, if he kept their interest, if he succeeded in the mastery of written communication" (p. 1129). What Ray's classmates will have helped him to do is to radically "re-see" his text.

A similar phenomenon occurs between Jim and Peter, peer response partners in the upper-level anthropology class Herrington and Cadman (1991) studied. It is only after Jim and Peter read one another's work that they realize their early drafts ignored a central part of the teacher's assignment. Though Jim and Peter both knew the assignment required the use of a catchy introduction, or "hook," they forgot to include one. As readers, they had more distance from the text than they did as writers, so it became easier to spot the deficiency. In their peer response session, Jim and Peter note their omission, offer suggestions for a remedy, and then revise their own work to include a hook in subsequent drafts (p. 195). Herrington and Cadman note, "Students can give sound advice to their

peers, even on matters they are having difficulty with in their own writing" (p. 185). We see this illustrated in yet another exchange between Jim and Peter. Their anthropology teacher instructed them to write "analytic" papers that were "professional in tone" (p. 193); in other words, she wanted them to acquire the academic discourse of anthropology. But the pair was struggling with this task. During one peer response session, Peter advises Jim to do less summarizing and more synthesizing of his sources. However, after a brief pause, Peter adds, "My paper in retrospect probably has the same shortcomings" (p. 193). In the course of telling Jim to consider making the change on his next draft, it dawns upon Peter that the very same problem exists in his own paper. Had Jim and Peter never engaged in peer response, the necessity of making this revision might not have occurred to them.

In responding to one another's texts, Jim and Peter have become better diagnosticians. Macrorie (1984), in his explanation of "helping circles," makes the connection between peer response and improving one's writing through self-diagnosis:

> The most surprising outcome of working in the circle is that your remarks about the other person's writing will help your own writing. When you comment on how a writing might end better or why its metaphors are strong, you're printing that thought about writing on

your brain more sharply than when you simply have the thought. Speaking it under the pressure of the group makes it yours, perhaps forever. One day writing a metaphor or an ending, you'll think of what you once said in the circle, and your help to another person will become help to you. (pp. 91-92)

In this passage, Macrorie has laid out how peer response can lead a writer to effective revision (in the short term, creating a better written product), while at the same time the oral component of collaborative conversation can lead to one's cognitive development (in the long term, improving one's writing processes).

The second expectation teachers have about effective peer response is that writers will maintain authorial control; that is, peer response partners should not become editors while writers passively incorporate every recommendation their partner makes. This teacher ideal emerges in the direct advice compositionists give to students. Elbow (1998) tells writers that they should listen carefully to the responses of real readers, but "don't be tyrannized by what they say" (p. 104). One of the reasons why he differentiates real readers from teachers is he says that real readers are more trustworthy because they are not in a position ultimately to judge the writing for a grade; in Elbow's view, the purpose of real readers is something other than validating a writer's work. Elbow

says, "Don't look to your readers to find out whether your words are any good. Look to them to find out about what your words make happen in real consciousness" (p. 104). In Elbow's teacherless writing groups, the writers are the ultimate authority on which words are good and which ones ought to be rewritten. Macrorie (1984) offers similar advice, reminding writers that they are the "final authority" on their own work. But like Elbow, Macrorie also warns writers against adopting a defensive stance, thus blocking out what might be useful feedback for future revisions (Macrorie, 1984, p. 93).

An emphasis on the maintenance of authorial control during classroom peer response also emerges when teachers present their research findings. The student comments Bellas (1970) selected to show the effectiveness of his peer response pedagogy stress the ways in which writers negotiated suggested revisions with responders. For example, one of his students says peer response was useful because of the following:

> Each criticism can be defended by the person being criticized. When a weakness is found, I can, for instance, state my intentions and either contend with and challenge that criticism or admit the failing and see what was not previous evident to me. (p. 272)

Like Bellas, Reimer (1993) also clearly considers authorial control an important part of peer response since she

includes in her article a three-page transcript of one group's confrontation over whether Mary, a student writer, should soften her position in her argumentative letter. At the conclusion of this excerpted transcript, Reimer states, "Mary's commitment to her side of the issue helped maintain her ownership in the piece" (p. 97). Reimer succinctly summarizes for us the first and second principles of effective peer response, as defined by teachers, as she says, "The primary purpose of a response group is to make the writing the best it can be and also that the writer has the final say in all revisions" (p. 80). Broadly speaking, teachers judge classroom peer response to be a useful exercise when students become better self-diagnosticians and when they are able to make informed decisions as to which reader feedback is valuable and which is not.

There are some compositionists, however, who warn that teachers can exert too heavy an influence on peer response groups in their zeal to fulfill an idealized version of classroom peer response. Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1977) say that for a peer group to succeed, "a lot depends on genuine sense of freedom from censoring surveillance" (p. 71). Gere (1987) picks up on the importance of group freedom as she differentiates between self-sponsored writing groups and school-sponsored writing

groups. She says that self-sponsored groups are

"nonhierarchical and give more emphasis to cooperation than

competition" (p. 50); whereas in school-sponsored groups,

there is always a performance aspect to student work

because the teacher will ultimately issue grades (p. 51).

Because group members feel as though they are competing

against one another for the teacher's approval, the group's

authority is "undercut" (p. 51) and the power of peer

response as a dynamic social construction of knowledge

decreases.

Macrorie (1984) comes to the same conclusion that Gere

does, that the usefulness of peer response decreases when

teachers play too prominent a role in the process.

Therefore, to mitigate the performance aspect of school-

sponsored peer response, he offers the following tips to

the student members of "helping circles":

> In the circle no one calls on you. You speak up if you
> have strong feelings. Truthfully. The moment you or
> anyone else in the circle makes a phony comment to
> please the writer or teacher, or to show off
> knowledge, the power of the circle is diminished. (p.
> 86)

For Macrorie, when group members fail to engage in "real"

communication, peer response feedback becomes artificial

and much less useful to writers.

While Macrorie focuses on ways students can increase the autonomy of their school-sponsored groups, Gere and others underscore actions teachers can take to restore a degree of student autonomy. Gere (1987) says that teacher involvement in classroom peer response is most appropriate at the beginning of the process. She notes that "relatively autonomous groups develop when the instructor prepares students with models and guidelines for group standards and procedures and then allows groups to proceed largely on their own" (p. 51). On the surface, it appears that Mirtz (Brooke, Mirtz, & Evans, 1994; chap. 4) supports many of the same methods for establishing semi-autonomous classroom writing groups; Mirtz employs some of the same terminology Gere uses, as she also advocates the use of "models" and "guidelines," particularly at the start of the semester.

Although Mirtz issues a strong warning against teacher interference and suggests "intervention" should only take place during "extreme cases when one member is simply out of line, refuses to try to cooperative, and is making everyone completely miserable" (p. 175), there are other moments when her discussion of the teacher's role seems to contradict itself. For example, when she counters the proposition that peer response can be used as a time-saving technique for teachers, she says she "strongly [advocates]

an active role for the instructor during small-group
workshops, either as a floating member or as a permanent
member of one group" (p. 181).

As Gere (1987) rightly points out, it is impossible
for students to exercise the autonomy of their group while
their teacher monitors everything they say. Therefore,
Mirtz's contradictions are illustrative of compositionists'
somewhat schizophrenic view that classroom-based peer
response can be both an empowering, liberatory experience
for students, while at the same time, the teacher can act
as a vigilant facilitator who insures students will respond
to one another's texts with as much skill as any expert
writer.

High school teacher Kristi Kraemer recognized this
sense of schizophrenia in her own pedagogy, and describes
her crisis of conscience when she realized she had remade
student writing groups in her idealized image of what
effective peer response should look like. She exclaims:

> No wonder response groups didn't "work" in my
> classroom! They weren't response groups. They didn't
> respond; they parroted. They answered questions.
> Students avoided and encouraged and edited and sought
> my help, but they didn't respond. (p. 137)

Kraemer adjusted her pedagogy to restore some student
control over their response groups. But other teachers

reveal through their own writings that they are not as self-reflective or as flexible as Kraemer.

Perhaps teachers' tendency towards heavy-handedness stems from the very real weaknesses they observe in some classroom peer response groups. Sometimes peer partners get off-topic; often, they misdiagnose textual problems or suggest faulty revision strategies. Untrained peer responders may detect textual problems that are not even there.

Newkirk (1984) makes a considerable contribution to the discussion on peer response pitfalls in his article "Direction and misdirection in peer response." In it, he pursues the question of whether students and teachers employ different standards when judging first-year essays. He asked 10 English instructors and 10 first-year students at the University of New Hampshire to rank four essays. There was a major discrepancy in the way teachers and students rated one essay in particular. The essay was titled "Friendships" and it was an extended metaphor comparing the writer's friends to different positions played on a baseball field. An overwhelming majority of teachers ranked this as the worst essay, while students put it in the middle range. Teachers said they disliked it because the extended metaphor didn't work and prevented the

writer from giving any insight into the nature of friendship. Students praised the essay because they thought the baseball metaphor showed originality. Meanwhile, students criticized the essay teachers ranked as the best because the students thought it was "just a straightforward kind of paper" (p. 307). Newkirk concludes that teachers should not expect peer responders to act as surrogate teachers since students and teachers evaluate writing in different ways.

Another problem often discussed in the literature on classroom peer response is student resistance. If one or more members of a peer response group refuses to participate or sabotages the group through disrupting behavior, personality conflicts can become the group's focus rather than response to one another's texts. In Gere and Stevens' study (1985), we see a pair of fifth graders, Ellen and Kurt, enter into frequent skirmishes which seem to have little to do with the texts before them. Gere and Stevens note that while the group "works together constructively" overall, there also are times when it degenerates into "personal attacks" (p. 98). For example, when Kurt questions Ellen about her fictional story

"Renting the Castle," their exchange becomes combative:

> Ellen:    My mother went over it and she's better at
>           language than you, she should know, I mean.
> Kurt:     Well, she doesn't.
> Ellen:    She does too. . . . Come on, can't you ever
>           be satisfied?
> Kurt:     No, not with your junk. (p. 88)

While Gere and Stevens' study does not concern itself with the pedagogical implications of this hostility, it is easy to see how such an exchange, when overheard, might make a teacher skittish about peer response.

Reimer (1993) describes a similar group conflict among her seventh grade students, Mary and Mark. Again, it appears the problems between this pair come from something outside the peer response task; Reimer notes that there may have been some "social issues" underlying Mary and Mark's antagonism, but says she was unaware of what those issues might have been (p. 89). The result is a heated peer response session, where Mary and Mark's comments are reduced to a back-and-forth debate of "yes it would," and "no it wouldn't" that reveals a stubborn deadlock more than any careful critical thinking. At one point towards the end of the session, Mary tells Mark to "Shut the heck up" (p. 96). Members of Mary and Mark's writing group described their peer response experience as frustrating and unhelpful. While Reimer ultimately views the group's work

as positive because it taught Mary how to retain authorial
control and prompted group members to practice problem-
solving skills, the group's "abnormal discourse" (Bruffee,
1984/1997) could surely cause teachers — particularly those
who espouse more traditional pedagogies — to become wary of
peer response.

*What We Know About Peer Response*

*Outside the Composition Classroom*

Scholars working within the writing center movement
have contributed much to our understanding of peer response
as they fine-tuned their definition of effective peer
tutoring. Just as classroom instructors discussed the
importance of writers maintaining their authorial control
during peer response sessions, writing center scholars
insisted that tutors take a non-directive stance towards
tutees. Brooks (1991/1995) describes what he calls
"minimalist tutoring," where tutors encourage writers to
think about their texts in new ways, but refrain from
offering concrete revision tips. He suggests that tutors
ask writers questions about their work, allowing writers to
flesh out their ideas, rather than tell them what should be
done to the paper. He advises tutors, "when something is
unclear, don't say, 'This is unclear'; rather, say, 'What

do you mean by this?'" (p. 86). He notes that holding back

one's own opinions "can be painfully difficult to do" (p.

84) because students often want to be told precisely what

to do to get a good grade on their paper. Also, if tutors

see a helpful revision that the writer fails to see, it may

be difficult to resist the urge to make a quick correction.

But to counter this urge, Brooks says tutors should avoid

holding a pen or pencil during the tutoring session; this

way, the writer is the only person to make notes on the

paper.

Brooks notes, "We often find it easier and more

satisfying to take charge, to muscle in on the student's

paper, red pen in hand" (p. 83). This is a common struggle

among both writing center tutors and peer responders; it is

often less time-consuming to edit than to offer

constructive criticism, and the role of editor makes one

feel more powerful and authoritative than the role of a

supportive reader. Still, Brooks reminds us that "the

primary value of the writing center tutor . . .," or in our

case the peer response partner, "is as a living human body

who is willing to sit patiently and help the student spend

time with her paper" (p. 84). Though some criticize the

principles of non-directive tutoring as too restrictive

(Clark, 1988/1995), much of Brooks' advice is sound, and

would be useful for peer responders to keep in mind —
whether they are working within a writing center, a
classroom, or their friend's dorm room. Brooks' minimalist
tutoring keeps the focus of peer response on improving the
students' long-term writing processes. Revising the
students' paper becomes the occasion for the tutoring
session, not the end goal.

Since writing center scholars have had to take special
pains to convince others that peer tutoring involves more
than proofreading and editing, the work of these scholars
reinforces compositionists' exhortations that peer
responders should attend to higher order concerns before
lower order concerns. North (1984/1995), in his treatise
"The Idea of a Writing Center," affirms the importance of
focusing on global issues such as organization and content
before local ones such as grammar errors. Young (2000)
presents a nuanced discussion of whether proofreading is
ever an appropriate task to be taken up during a tutoring
session. She concludes that proofreading *is* an important
part of the writing process, one that is worthy of
discussion, but she notes that it should be tackled only
when writers have produced fairly well-developed drafts.
Young says it is important for tutors and student writers
to discuss openly the paper's status to decide whether it

is ready for proofreading (p. 113); she suggests that it is inefficient for tutors to spend time proofreading an early draft because the corrected words and phrases will most likely be omitted from the final draft anyway.

Another important contribution of writing center scholars has been their call for flexibility during tutoring sessions. Their articles suggest it is inappropriate to use a cookie-cutter approach to peer response because the process is situated in the personalities and needs of the participants. Moore (1950/1995) wrote early on this subject, saying that writing centers (though he called them "writing clinics" at the time) offered a rare chance for individualized instruction within the university. He says that writing centers are best able "to uncover individual difficulties" and "to avoid wasting the student's time on material that he does not need" (p. 7). Decades after Moore's article, his successors set out to assess and then address the needs of specific populations of writing center clients. Haynes-Burton (1990/1995) researches the growing number of non-traditional, older students who often return to the university late in life because of a major life transition — perhaps they lost a job or suddenly became the sole household wage-earner. She notes that these students may

have different academic concerns than younger students, so tutors should not treat them the same. Konstant (1992/1995) focuses on learning-disabled students, saying that they are just as intelligent and competent as other students, but they process information differently. Therefore, she says tutors should experiment with different teaching methods — things such as role-playing, color-coding parts of students' papers, and other techniques — to accommodate those with learning disabilities.

Finally, through the growing body of literature on tutoring ESL writers, we again learn that a flexible approach is the most effective. Powers (1993/1995) points out that the minimalist, non-directive tutoring model does not work as well with non-native speakers because they may not understand rhetorical conventions of English, particularly those of academic writing. Other traditional writing center techniques, such as editing-by-ear, may also be inappropriate, so Powers advises tutors to be sensitive to the ESL student's needs and adjust to his or her abilities on a case-by-case basis. She says, "We can assist ESL writers to become more capable writers of English only if we understand what they bring to the writing center conference and allow that perspective to determine our conferencing strategies" (p. 102). Hiring tutors with

diverse language backgrounds will aid in this understanding students. Haynes-Burton (1990/1995) asserts, "Not only is it important to hire or appoint tutors with diverse disciplinary backgrounds and good writing skills, it is equally important to mirror the ethnic, gender, and age differences of the general student population of any institution" (p. 104).

Writing teachers would do well to understand the role that non-classroom peer response plays in their students' learning process, particularly those students of diverse ethnicities, genders, ages, and language proficiencies. Whom do these students turn to for peer response help when the teacher has no input on their decision? Do they choose peer response partners who are similar to themselves or do they make their selection based on some other criteria?

## Research Directions

More than three decades of peer response research, conducted in classrooms, laboratory settings, and writing centers, has demonstrated the value of peer response for its social construction of knowledge. Additionally, composition researchers and theorists have made compelling arguments that autonomous peer response groups offer students the greatest opportunities to improve their

writing, to learn from one another, and to exercise their authorial control. Since extracurricular peer response groups operate beyond the scope of a teacher's watchful eye, these groups are the least likely to be influenced by teacher ideologies about "proper" peer response practices. Therefore, extracurricular peer response sessions, such as those taking place where students live, offer rich opportunities to study the naturalistic behavior of student peer responders. Chapter III details the research methodology I used to study the social context of peer response in a first-year residence hall and the peer response ideologies students develop as they engage in peer response of this kind.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study began a week before the Fall 2004 semester
and continued into the Spring 2005 semester. The research
site was a co-ed first-year residence hall at [College
XYZ]. Since a heterogeneous population is necessary "to
maximize discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and
problems that occur in the particular context under study"
(Erlandson, E. L. Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 82), I
chose the largest co-ed first-year residence hall on
campus. A hall with a large population, such as this one,
offered me a greater probability of capturing several peer
response sessions. [Central Hall] is a six-story, first-
year residence hall, co-ed by cluster; it houses
approximately 200 first-year residents, five resident
assistants, and one Area Director. There is one large
common area on the first floor in the form of a student
lounge.

This chapter begins with a rationale for my
qualitative research design and for selecting [College XYZ]
as my research site. I also explain why I have relied
heavily on student recorders — a type of participant

observers — for much of my data collection, and I discuss

how I addressed potential problems in motivating

participants to cooperate. Finally, I describe in detail

the procedures for collecting and analyzing various data

sources.

Rationale for an Ethnographic Approach

At the height of peer response research in the mid-

1980s, one of the most common methodologies used by

composition scholars was protocol analysis. Researchers

using this method worked under the assumption that by

asking peer responders to talk aloud as they reviewed a

given text, researchers would be able to understand the

cognitive processes being used. Then, researchers would

analyze the protocol by counting the number of global and

local comments made by the responders (Flower, Hayes,

Carey, Schriver, & Stratman, 1986; Hayes, Flower, Schriver,

Stratman, & Carey, 1987). This methodology was severely

limited for several reasons: (1) the researchers believed

they were objective judges of the phenomenon exhibited

through the protocol, (2) the researchers believed their

findings could be generalized to other populations, such as

"basic writers" or "expert writers," (3) the researchers

set up lab-like settings and failed to ignore that context

played a role in the phenomenon being studied, and (4) the researchers failed to recognize how their own values and biases affected the designs and outcomes of their studies.

I have rejected the positivistic paradigm of protocol analysis and comparable quantitative methods and chose a naturalistic, qualitative approach instead because I believe I would better understand student peer response practices if I studied the phenomenon in context. Lauer and Asher (1988) have said that in "descriptive research," scholars try to leave the environment they are studying intact, preserving the authenticity of the participants' behavior as much as possible (p. 15). Since several compositionists (Elbow, 1998; Gere, 1987; Moffett, 1968; Murray, 1968) suggest that student writing groups thrive when teacher influences are decreased and group autonomy is increased, it was imperative for me to maintain a hands-off approach.

Also, since ethnography emphasizes the "social interactions, behaviors, and beliefs of a community or social group" (Moss, 1992), it was a particularly useful research methodology for this study because it kept the focus on the first-year writers and responders. An ethnographic design allowed me to understand residential peer response practices among first-year students more

fully; the goal was not to superimpose value judgments about whose peer response ideologies — teachers' or students' — are right or wrong. The goal was to understand the phenomenon of residential peer response in its own context.

A naturalistic, qualitative study such as this one must, by definition, remain an organic process because "the inquirer and phenomenon is largely unpredictable in advance" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41). Therefore, I followed an emergent design. Throughout the project, I evaluated the effectiveness of my intended method, and I made adjustments as the need arose. The study started at the beginning of the Fall 2004 semester and stretched into the Spring 2005 semester. Prolonged engagement helped me understand the complexity of [Central Hall's] social environment, helped me establish trust and credibility among residents, and helped me describe the context in greater detail (Erlandson et al., 1993).

## Selecting the Research Site

There are several reasons why it was important that I had convenient and regular access to the research site: (1) to understand the dynamics of peer response within a first-year residence hall, prolonged engagement was necessary,

(2) gaining entry to a residential facility presented special challenges and close proximity to the gatekeeping officials allowed me to smooth over any problems more quickly and efficiently, and (3) ongoing intensive training of student recorders was necessary to insure that the data they collected was of a high-quality and that they followed ethical protocols as they obtained that data.

Therefore, I chose to consider only those research sites within a 50-mile radius of my place of residence at the time of the study. Two universities fell within that geographical area: [College ABC] and [College XYZ]. Since, as of this writing, there have been no studies that look at peer response practices in residence halls, I wanted to begin the discussion by investigating what might be considered the most typical first-year residence hall I could find. Both universities fit these criteria because they are four-year, medium-sized, public university. However, I have excluded [College ABC] because it is primarily a commuter college.

Since I had taught first-year writing at [College XYZ] in the past, I realize my potential bias. As Agee (2002) notes, "being a native" presents problems similar to those of "going native." She argues that "researchers who enter familiar settings such as schools where they have been

socialized in early years begin their work with layers of

assumptions" (p. 571). To minimize the potential pitfalls

of being a native, I worked with a peer debriefer who

challenged me to question my assumptions; the peer

debriefer reduced the likelihood that my status as a native

blinded me to emergent data patterns. Furthermore, in some

ways, being a native may have worked to my advantage. For

example, as I tried to gain access to the first-year

residence hall, it may have been easier for me to convince

Student Housing administrators of my credibility since I

had once been a native and they could check my references

on campus.

## Prior Ethnography

The summer before I launched the study, I explained my

study to official gatekeepers, such as the Director of

Student Housing and the Dean of Student Affairs. Then, to

help me select what can be considered the most typical

first-year residence hall on campus, I collected

information about each building, such as how many residents

lived there, how many resident assistants lived on each

floor, and whether or not it was co-ed. Once I had chosen

[Central Hall] and gained permission to work there, I took

a guided tour with the building's Area Director. It was

important for me to get a sense of the building's floor plan because I did not know whether the placement of common spaces might have become a significant element of the study; one of the original questions I had was where students choose to conduct peer response sessions — in their dorm rooms, study lounges, or other common spaces (see Appendix E and Chapter IV, which both address this question).

I also arranged to meet as many members of the residence life staff as possible because these individuals were important informal gatekeepers. [Central Hall's] Area Director granted me access to his resident assistants' training session, which took place in mid-August, two weeks before Move-in Day. These resident assistants provided me with anecdotal information about the extent to which peer response sessions occurred in first-year residence halls. Their background information helped me place my resources in strategic places once the study began and it helped me begin to develop my grounded theory. Also, this early exposure to student resident assistants helped ease my entrance into the research site; the more residents who would recognize my name and face at the start of the study, the better.

Move-In Day offered another opportunity for early exposure to [Central Hall's] residents. I assisted the residence life team as they checked students into their rooms and answered questions that the students or their family members had. Amid the chaos of moving 200 students into a six-story residence hall, I was another welcoming face ready to greet students. Then, when I visited the residence hall the second week of the semester to explain my study and distribute informed consent forms, some of the students already recognized me and began to accept my presence as an ethnographer. Not only did I gain valuable exposure by participating on Move-In Day, but I also helped [Central's] Area Director and resident assistants. Lincoln and Guba argue that "meaningful human research is impossible without the full understanding and cooperation of the respondents" (p. 105), and in order to achieve full cooperation from respondents, the concept of reciprocity should be addressed. In other words, the role of the researcher should be to act as "a giver," not just "a taker."

## Negotiating Problems of Access

Specific description of life in the residence halls was necessary to write up my findings so that readers would

understand the context in which the peer response sessions occurred. Because I chose to explore a phenomenon that happens in a private, rather than a more "permeable" public setting (Agee, 2002, p. 573), my entry as a researcher presented a unique challenge and an opportunity to learn more about the hidden lives of freshmen. Since I wanted to capture the spontaneous nature of peer response outside the classroom, I needed to find a way to position myself inside the residence hall around the clock. This was an impossibility. While Moffatt (1989), an anthropologist, was somehow able to fool his student participants by disguising himself as a college freshmen (at the age of 33) and living among them in a Rutgers University residence hall, this was not something I was willing to do, for ethical and for practical reasons.

A researcher's difficulties in gaining access are not only a matter of logistics, but also trust. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that "the relationship between the investigator and other respondents . . . must be authentic" (p. 105). There are two factors, however, that stood in the way of my developing an authentic relationship with first-year students in their residence hall: (1) my age, and (2) my status as a composition teacher on campus. These factors clearly marked me as a member of the out-group. In the

past, ethnographers have discovered the difficulties of
gaining participants' trust if the ethnographer is a member
of an out-group. Labov (1972) found that African-American
children being studied for their linguistic abilities were
more likely to open up when they were interviewed by an
African-American researcher rather than a white researcher.
From this, Labov concluded that when there are obvious
differences between researchers and participants (in his
study, it was a matter of race; in my study, age), then
data collection will be negatively affected.

Another concern I had was that the presence of a
teacher might contaminate the naturalistic setting I wished
to study. For example, it was likely that age and power
differentials would have inhibited first-year students from
opening up if I, as a 30-something-year-old teacher, were
to sit in the corner of their bedroom to observe them. A
fundamental part of this study was to explore how peer
response practices differed between sessions that are held
in the residence hall vs. in the classroom. It seems to me
that to study peer response in its purest form, the only
people who should be present during a peer response session
in the residence hall are *peers*.

To solve this problem, I solicited the help of a team
of trained student recorders who would be available to

operate a tape recorder and take field notes (see Appendix A for a copy of the Observation Notes form) when peer response sessions were about to take place. Study participants were asked to notify one of the observers before they initiated a peer response session. Then, the observer would set up a tape recorder, remind participants that their comments would be recorded, and act as an unobtrusive observer, taking field notes during the peer response session.

Student recorders were responsible for storing the audio recorder and tapes, and they collected any documents relating to the peer response sessions they observed. But first, special arrangements had to be made to photocopy these peer response documents, since writers needed to retain their papers to read their partner's written feedback and consider future revisions. Student recorders were instructed to borrow the document briefly and make a copy of it as soon as possible. Without rewinding the tape or reading the documents, the student recorders placed these items in a sealed envelope. Within 48 hours of each session, student recorders were asked to contact me by email to arrange delivery of the tape and related documents so that I could begin the transcription process.

The student participants (both the student recorders and those whose peer response sessions become part of the study), got the opportunity to watch scholarly research in action, and when I shared the final results of my study, they gained greater insight into what it means to do effective peer response.

Ethical Protection of Study Participants

Before launching this study, I gained approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, both at my degree-granting institution of Indiana University of Pennsylvania and my research site [College XYZ]. I obtained IRB approval from [College XYZ] on July 19, 2004 and from IUP on September 7, 2004.

During the first and second weeks of the Fall 2004 semester, all [Central Hall] residents had to attend hall meetings; it was during these meetings that I explained the study and distributed consent forms. The forms assured that students gave their fully informed and voluntary consent to participate in the study. At this point, I informed residents that anyone enrolled in one of my courses (I taught two sections of first-year English in Fall 2004 and four sections in Spring 2005) would be excluded from the

participant pool.[1] This way, I would be able to avoid any

misperceptions among potential participants that their

grades would be affected by their decision, that they would

be rewarded or penalized according to their involvement in

the study. Furthermore, peer response and writing groups

were central to my pedagogy, and I did not want to

contaminate the study by projecting my peer response

ideology on my students who then might alter their

residential peer response practices accordingly. To

preserve the naturalistic quality of the behavior being

studied, to maintain student autonomy among peer

responders, and to ensure voluntary student consent, it was

imperative for me to separate my role as teacher on campus

from my role as researcher in [Central Hall].

Other ethical protections for the research

participants included (1) the use of pseudonyms to mask the

identities of writers, responders, and student recorders,

(2) a portion of the consent form asking students their

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[1]  This is how Session 2 came to be excluded from my data. In the fall, when I collected consent forms, the responder from Session 2 was not enrolled in one of my courses. The responder and writer from Session 2 completed their session in the fall, and that was when I transcribed their session and conducted my follow-up interviews. However, that Spring semester, the responder from Session 2 enrolled in my course inadvertently. Since it would have been an inconvenience for the responder to drop my course and select another teacher, I decided to exclude Session 2 from this study. I believed it was important to exclude this session to protect the responder and to insure that the responder understood that involvement in the study would have no bearing  — positive or negative — on the responder's success in my course.

date of birth so that all residents under the age of 18
would be excluded from the study, (3) a reminder on the
consent form that their participation in the study was
confidential and their teachers would not have access to my
data, and (4) the ability for participants to drop out of
the study at any time.

## Training for Student Recorders

Training sessions for student recorders were held the
first month of the fall semester. I provided each recorder
with a training packet (see Appendix B), which included the
following materials:

- A brief explanation of the study.
- My contact information: email address and
  work phone number.
- A copy of the informed consent form (which
  they had signed previously). It included
  information on how to drop out of the study.
- An explanation of their responsibilities.
- A copy of the informed consent form
  participants had signed and an explanation
  of the ethical guidelines co-researchers
  must follow.

- Observation forms, which they used to record field notes.

- Information on how to record field notes (i.e. how to remain in the background, how much detail to write down, etc.).

- A "checklist of elements" to look for such as the ones Merriam proposes — matters of setting, frequency and duration, subtle factors (as cited in Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 97).

- Clear instructions on how to operate the tape recorder and advice on how to get the best-recorded sound quality.

As a group, we reviewed these materials and discussed in detail the checklist of elements to observe during peer response sessions. The student recorders were encouraged to contact me at any point with any questions or concerns that might arise during their participation in the study.

Since students were scheduled to leave campus for a month of Winter Break, I was concerned that much of what they would have learned about field note taking and observation technique could become stale; therefore, to "recalibrate" these human instruments, I led another training session at the beginning of the spring semester.

Sampling

My goal was to have two or three recorders for each floor of [Central Hall] (Note: approximately 40 students lived on each of the uppermost five residential floors; fewer than 10 students lived on the first floor). This would allow for potential attrition, and peer response pairs would have several recorders to draw from. This type of flexibility had to be built into the project because peer response partners need to be able to find an available co-researcher at the exact moment they want to collaborate. If there wasn't a large enough pool of recorders for the participants to contact, then the data might have been lost or the peer response pair might have felt that they needed to postpone their work. I did not want to interrupt the natural flow of the phenomenon to be studied, and I did not wish to interfere with the academic schedule of my participants.

As for drawing a sample of peer response participants, this was a bit more difficult. As Lauer and Asher (1988) note, one of the problems ethnographers often face is "the availability of information" (p. 46). Essentially, I had to rely on the goodwill and commitment of the residents and of the student recorders for data collection, but this was necessary to maintain the naturalistic quality of student-

sponsored peer response. Therefore, I took several steps to maximize my chances for retrieving "available information."

First, I had hoped that positive word of mouth about my study would make the dorm residents more willing to participate, so it was important to have a strong degree of buy-in from key people in the dorm and on campus. The prior ethnography work I had done created a "positive buzz" among [Central] residents and their resident assistants. Second, I contacted all first-year writing instructors who taught in the fall semester during this study, and I asked them to make an announcement at the start of the semester to say that a study of peer response is taking place on campus and that some students may be asked to participate. Finally, I followed the lead of Shahidian (2001) — an anthropologist who also had a difficult time gaining access to the community he wanted to research — and I posted flyers in the dorm, publicizing my study and listing my contact information in case residents had any questions about the project. I worked to make these flyers as eye-catching as possible, and I designed several versions of the flyer to post in [Central Hall] throughout the course of the study so that the flyers did not become "stale."

Participant Motivation

Capturing naturalistic behavior is a difficult

challenge for any ethnographer, especially one who is an

outsider to the community being studied. In this study,

these difficulties were heightened by my reliance on

student recorders — a necessary provision in my estimation.

Although enlisting the cooperation of participants and

student recorders presented a special challenge, the

following is a list of reasons why I believed this

methodology would succeed:

> (1) Momentum would build as buy-in grows, starting
>
> with the Area Director and resident assistants and
>
> then trickling down to the student recorders and
>
> general population of hall residents. Enthusiasm can
>
> be contagious, especially in the dense/multiplex
>
> social network of a campus residence hall.[2]
>
> (2) The study's launch coincided with the start of
>
> first-year students' college experience. In the first
>
> weeks of classes, when first-year students are
>
> initially exposed to campus life, there is a level of

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[2] Wardhaugh (1998, p. 127) says that a dense social network is one where people in a given community share the same acquaintances; he says that a multiplex network is one where people are tied together in more than one way. A first-year residence hall fulfills both of these requirements because residents get to know one another through hall meetings and social "mixers," and residents have overlapping roles. For example, hallmates and resident assistants are neighbors, but they may also be teammates, classmates, fellow fraternity or sorority members, etc.

uncertainty because they do not know what to expect. One could argue that first-year students at the beginning of their fall semester are more open to the possibilities of campus life than they ever will be, since they have had little time to form permanent judgments. In addition, during this formative period, first-year students tend to spend a great deal of time with their hallmates and resident assistants because they know few people beyond those in their residence hall. Consequently, it may be easier to recruit participants for this study by capitalizing on the unity of the first-year residence hall than it would be if I were studying an upperclassman hall.

(3) The research site housed approximately 200 residents, and of those 200 residents, 10 were selected and trained as student recorders. The recorders provided a solid base from which to draw writers and responders. These recorders represented 5 percent of the resident population; this alone is a respectable sample, though it was likely that some student recorders would conduct peer response sessions with their non/recorder friends, thus widening the pool of participants. Furthermore, I figured that even if I had a small sample of writers and responders,

they might conduct multiple sessions with one another, which would augment my data supply.

(4) My frequent contact with student recorders — at training sessions and as I picked up the data they had collected — served as a reminder of the ongoing study. Also, I offered student recorders small incentives for their participation; for example, I provided pizza and soda at their training sessions, and I brought them small gifts of appreciation throughout the study (e.g. gift cards for their university bookstore, snack food to share with their hallmates, and handwritten thank-you notes).

## Participant Representativeness

To insure that the writers and responders who participated in this study were broadly representative of the general population residing in [Central Hall], I held a focus group session at the end of the Spring semester. Since none of the 10 sessions recorded for this study involved residents from [Central Hall's] second floor, I asked the resident assistant from that hall to invite his students to participate in a focus group, where I provided pizza and soda and gave each student a $10 gift card to the university bookstore.

Nine students attended the focus group (six females and three males — a gender balance that mimicked that of the peer response participants). I asked the focus group members whether they engaged in extracurricular peer response during the past academic year, either as a writer or as a responder. If they had participated in extracurricular peer response, I asked them to describe the frequency of their sessions. Each focus group member was asked to answer these questions on a slip of paper, so their answers were anonymous. All but one of the nine students said they did engage in extracurricular peer response within the past academic year. Here is a sample of the focus group members' comments:

- "Five times I gave someone my paper. Once I looked at someone else's paper. They were friends, and History/English papers."

- "I proofread a lot of papers. I'm an English major."

- "The only time I really used peer response was when I was really stressed and needed help. I went to [a fellow hallmate] because he is good at papers. He really helped me a lot."

- "This year I probably had three people look over my work. It was very informal, yet helpful. I went to my friends and clustermates."

- From the outlier: "Never once!! This year, I didn't have anyone ask me for help, nor did I ask."

Although generalizability is never the goal of a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the focus group session provided me with assurances that the peer responders who participated in this study were representative of the environment in which they lived, [Central Hall at College XYZ].

## Data Sources

Data sources for this study included audio tapes and transcripts of peer response sessions; field notes taken by trained student recorders; peer response documents, to include the author texts, paper prompts, and course syllabi; audio tapes and transcripts from follow-up interviews with student authors and responders; and written responses from the end-of-the-year focus group session. In a "traditional" peer response session — one in which

writers and responders sit side-by-side while the responder

offers written and/or oral feedback — all of these data

sources are possible. However, one potential problem

concerning data collection was that student peer response

behavior might diverge from this traditional classroom-

based model. The following are two possible peer response

scenarios and the data sources that might have been

expected in each case:

- A writer drops a paper off at a hallmate's room,
  then leaves: sources could include tape recording
  of initial discussion between writer and
  responder, tape recording of any wrap-up
  discussions between writer and responder, field
  notes limited to the time writers and responders
  are in the same room together, peer response
  documents (paper with written feedback, paper
  prompt), and tape/transcript of follow-up
  interview.

- Writers and responders communicate via email:
  participants would be asked to print out their
  papers and any related email messages. Sources
  may include email print-outs, other related
  documents (such as paper prompts and written

notes made by writer or responder), and

tape/transcript of follow-up interview.

Although I prepared for the contingencies listed above, none of them manifested themselves in the 10 peer response sessions comprising this study.

*Tapes / Transcripts of Peer Response Sessions*

At the start of a peer response session, student observers set up an audio recorder and began taping. Each student observer used a Sony Clear Voice Plus Microcasette$^{TM}$-Corder, which was selected because this model had an omnidirectional microphone to capture clearly the comments made by the writer and by the responder and because it operated on batteries instead of a plug so that response partners could move freely during their session.

At the start of every session, the writer and peer responder recited their names and stated the date and time of the session. Then, they rewound the tape and played it back to make sure that it was operating correctly. If the response pair was to forget to do this, the observer (who is in the room taking field notes) was instructed to remind the writer and responder of the proper procedure.

Mishler (1986) reminds us, "Because there is no universal form of transcription that is adequate for all

research questions and settings, the criteria for choice are theoretical concerns and practical constraints" (p. 49). The way I transcribed the peer response sessions was informed by my purpose in collecting this data. I used the recording of the peer response sessions to find out what happened (or didn't happen) when students work together. Therefore, I was looking for a more holistic understanding rather than for a linguistic transcript of what is said. So, I approached the transcription with a layering approach. The first time I transcribed the tapes, I used my knowledge of peer response to summarize the content of the peer response session. For example, I noted things like:

- whether the author or the responder seemed to do more talking during the session.
- whether the responder paid more attention to higher order concerns or lower order concerns (McAndrew & Reigstad, 2001).
- how the peer response partners dealt with issues of audience.

I listened to the tapes and summarized my findings several times, stopping only when I hit a point of redundancy. Then, I saved the tapes and returned to them for a more complete transcription when I decided to highlight a particular session as one of my critical

incidents in the final report (see Appendix C for a sample transcript).

*Documents*

The documents I analyzed included the student recorders' field notes, the academic papers focused on during peer response sessions, paper prompts, and course syllabi. Participants were instructed to write their names in their own handwriting at the top of their papers to eliminate confusion as to which person wrote what. At the end of the peer response session, the recorder collected the documents, photocopied them, and put them in a sealed envelope. The recorder then delivered the envelope to me, generally within 48 hours of the session.

*Tapes / Transcripts of Follow-up Interviews*

The follow-up interview was important not only for triangulation, but also as a step that would limit the extent to which I am superimposing my values on what I see. During this interview, participants could tell me how they interpreted what was going on during their peer response session.

My goal was to conduct the follow-up interviews within days of the original peer response session so that the

details of the session could be readily recalled by the

participants. Trying to track down the writers and

responders and identifying times when I could meet with

them proved more difficult than I anticipated, however. In

general, I was able to complete the follow-up interviews

within a few days of the original peer response session.

(One notable exception was Session 3. I was unable to

secure follow-up interviews with the writer and responder,

so I had to exclude this session from my data).

By the time the follow-up interviews took place, I had

received the peer response data and had begun the analysis

process, which involved completing a summarized transcript

of the session and coding the related documents. Also, I

had formulated a list of questions that I felt needed to be

answered for me to have a more complete picture of what

happened during the session. I had planned for some of the

interview to be structured and focus on what Patton calls

"knowledge questions" (as cited in Erlandson et al., 1993,

p. 88) and for other parts of the interview to be semi-

structured and focus on "opinion / value questions" so that

I could find out what the peer response partners felt or

thought about their completed session (Erlandson et al.,

1993, p. 88). Allowing for this mix of structured semi-

structured questions provided me with the flexibility

needed to get a full picture of the participants'
experience of extracurricular peer response.

To the extent that their schedules permitted it,
authors and responders were interviewed simultaneously. I
brought the documents related to their peer response
session[3] and asked them to comment on anything they thought
was important. I also used this opportunity to do member
checking by showing the response partners a copy of my
summarized transcript and asking them to correct any
mistakes or misrepresentations I may have made. Also, the
transcript served as a springboard for our discussion of
their completed peer response session.

The peer response partners choose the location for the
follow-up interview because it was important that the
participants felt comfortable so that they would be more
forthcoming with their information. The only location
requirement, however, was that the participants had to
choose a quiet place where we were unlikely to be
interrupted.

The follow-up interview was taped and then transcribed
verbatim. I used a more detailed transcription method for
the follow-up interview than I did for the peer response

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[3] I intentionally did not bring the co-researcher's field notes to the
follow-up interview for member checking because I feared that the co-
researchers might have censored themselves if they knew that their
hallmates would be reading their work.

session because I had hoped the opinion / value questions would elicit responses I could quote in my final report. Furthermore, using the participants' own words would "familiarize readers with the people who were studied and enable the reader to 'hear' what the researcher heard" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 39).

Coding

Miles and Huberman (1984) define a code as "an abbreviation or symbol applied to a segment of words…in order to *classify* the words" (p. 56). Coding helped me manage and organize all the data sources in my study because the process of coding condensed a great deal of information. All transcripts from the peer response sessions were coded according to Glaser and Strauss's constant comparative method (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, ch. 12). As I began this method, I used as a springboard the three coding categories — Inform, Direct, and Elicit — from Gere and Stevens' study (1985) on the discourse of student writing groups. These broad categories were then narrowed and modified throughout the course of my study, but Gere and Stevens' codes provided a useful starting point because they offered me insight into the directive/non-directive nature of peer response sessions.

I devised my coding system, discussed in detail below, by going through several rounds of coding, keeping the codes that fit the data and getting rid of the codes that did not serve their purpose. In doing this, I followed Miles and Huberman's advice not to wait to the end of the study to code my data because, as they point out, "coding is not just something one does to 'get the data ready' for analysis, but something that drives ongoing data collection" (1984, p. 63).

The first element in my coding system refers to the person making the utterance. Writers are represented by "W" and responders are represented by "R." This first element was followed by a dash. Then, the second element is a series of letters that refers to the type of utterance made (see Appendix D for an explanation of these elements and examples of each coding category). Some utterances fall into two coding categories simultaneously. In this case, both coding categories are listed, and they are separated by a slash (e.g. R-IWP/R-BB).

Most of the utterances captured during the peer response sessions were one of three types: comments where the speakers were Informing ("I), Directing ("D), or Eliciting ("I") information from their partners. When speakers made Informing comments, they were sharing

knowledge and expressing judgments or opinions in a neutral manner, without telling their partners what to do or believe. When speakers made Directing comments, they were giving direct or overt advice; this could be phrased as an order (e.g. "Do this," "You should," or "You need to"), or it could be phrased as a question or as a suggested option (e.g. "You might want to," "You could"). Also, a Directing comment could be addressed to oneself (e.g. "I have to go back and organize it"). When speakers made Eliciting comments, they were asking for more information, asking for a clarification, or seeking specific input from their partners. Within each type of comment (Informing, Directing, and Eliciting), there is a sub-category that indicates what the comment was about.

In addition to the three main categories of Informing, Directing, and Eliciting comments, the other main code categories included (1) "r," which indicated the speaker was reading the text aloud without, whether it was the original text or a revised version of the text; (2) "BB," which represented bonding behavior between peer response participants; and (3) "H," which meant the speaker made some type of phatic comment.

Ultimately, the coding process aided me as I formulated and reformulated my grounded theory of peer

response in the dorms. It also helped me draw conclusions about the differences between extracurricular peer response practices and classroom peer response practices.

## Audit Trail

Establishing trustworthiness is part of the responsibility of a thorough qualitative researcher. Lincoln and Guba argue that one of the best way to prove a study's trustworthiness is through a "confirmability audit" (1985, ch. 11). I archived research materials to fulfill Halpern's six audit trail categories (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, p. 319-20) in the following manner:

1. <u>raw data</u>: audio tapes, field notes, peer response documents, focus group documents.

2. <u>data reduction and analysis products</u>: transcripts, coding grids, and lists of emergent conclusions generated through the coding process.

3. <u>data reconstruction and synthesis products</u>: my final dissertation and drafts of my dissertation with the written comments of my committee members.

4. <u>process notes</u>: methodological journal, list of the names of residents, copies of all emails sent

to and received from my dissertation committee members, member checking notes.

5. <u>intentions and dispositions</u>: dissertation proposal, personal statement on how I value peer response, a sample of the books and articles used for literature review, with my comments written in the margins.

6. <u>instrument development</u>: training packet for co-researchers and list of interview questions.

Presentation of Results

I have written up my results using a critical incident format because this allows me to use narrative techniques to tell the story of freshmen students as they experience peer response. Erlandson et al. (1993) define critical incidents as "those that either highlight the normal operation of [a certain institution or practice] or contrast sharply with it" (p. 103). In this study, I have identified peer response sessions that seemed to me either to be very similar to traditional classroom-based sessions or to be very different.

Furthermore, the critical incident format provides the reader with the thick description necessary to give the scene verisimilitude (Denzin, 1997). Denzin says, "A text

with high verisimilitude provides the opportunity for
vicarious experience" and this means "readers come to know
some things told, as if he or she had experienced them" (p.
10). Verisimilitude not only makes reading the research
report more enjoyable, but it also gives a study
legitimation (Denzin, p. 10).

## Conclusion

The ethnographic methods outlined previously minimize
the degree to which teachers' peer response ideologies
influence student peer response, thus preserving the
naturalistic behavior of extracurricular peer response. The
use of student recorders helps maintain the natural social
context of a residence hall. Also, the tape recorded
conversations capture writers and responders' uncensored
discussions, so we can determine whether students discuss
peer response in different terms during extracurricular
sessions than they do during classroom sessions. The
triangulation of data sources (field notes, documents, tape
recordings and transcripts, and follow-up interview tape
recordings and transcripts) offer a variety of ways to help
us begin to understand (1) the social context of
extracurricular peer response, and (2) the ways in which

traditional classroom peer response differs from

extracurricular peer response.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS


This chapter explores critical incidents that occurred within the extracurricular peer response sessions recorded for this study. The critical incidents discussed below offer insight into (1) the social context of extracurricular peer response, and (2) the ways in which traditional classroom peer response differs from extracurricular peer response, which, in turn, implies a difference between teacher and student ideologies of peer response (see "Teacher Interpretation of Off-Topic Discourse," pp. 125-128).

Contextualizing Extracurricular Peer Response Sessions

*Academic Standing of the Participants*

The writers and responders in this study represented a variety of grade point averages (GPAs) and majors. Their GPAs from the fall semester of their first college year ranged from a 2.7 to a 3.9, and their intended majors included business, biology, early childhood education, and psychology. In fact, none of the writers or responders planned to major in English, a major which might be

expected among a pool of students who voluntarily engaged in peer response.

## *Environmental Factors*

### *Location*

[Central Hall] is a six-story, first-year residence hall, co-ed by cluster; it houses approximately 200 first-year residents. There is one large common area on the first floor in the form of a student lounge.

With one exception, half of the 10 sessions happened in the writers' room and half happened in the responders' rooms. (Session 10 deviated from this pattern since it occurred in the lounge of the residence hall; however, the session participants were unique in that they lived on the first floor — the only floor in the building that featured a lounge).

### *Timing*

While some teachers might expect extracurricular peer response sessions to be clustered around the end of the semester, that was not the case for participants in this study. In both the Fall and Spring semesters, peer response sessions tended to occur about one month into the semester or at mid-semester (see Appendix E).

All but two of the sessions occurred the night before the papers were due; the exceptions being Sessions 4 and 5, whereby the sessions occurred two days prior to the papers' due dates. Furthermore, all of the sessions occurred in the early afternoon or evening, and none of the sessions took place in the morning. The start times for the sessions ranged from 3:32 p.m. to 9:15 p.m., and the duration of the sessions varied, with the shortest lasting 11 minutes and the longest lasting 27 minutes. The length of the papers reviewed did not appear to affect the length of the peer response sessions (the shortest paper was 2.5 pages long, and the corresponding session lasted 27 minutes, whereas the longest paper was 6 pages long, and the corresponding session lasted 25 minutes).

*Performing Peer Response in a Technology-Rich Environment*

Since the rooms in this residence hall are arranged in clusters, with five rooms positioned along a small corridor, noise from the corridor often wafts into the residents' rooms. Also, many of the hallmates keep their doors open and enter one another's rooms frequently. Repeatedly in these sessions, students respond to a steady stream of distractions — chiming computers indicating new emails or Instant Messages, televisions or stereos blaring

in the background, roommates or hallmates interrupting with questions or reminders about upcoming social events.

In the middle of one 19-minute session [Session 9], Tamara (the writer), sings along with the music playing in the room, and reads an Instant Message on her computer. Tamara also discusses topics such as her difficulties communicating with her father, her love life, and the love life of her roommate's sister. All the while, Shannon (the responder) reads Tamara's literary analysis paper, writing comments and suggestions in bright turquoise ink. Toward the end of this session, Tamara receives a phone call from her mother, which she takes, while Shannon finishes working on the paper. In the midst of the phone call, the writer and responder decide that they've already discussed the important features of the paper, so Shannon tells Tamara's roommate, "the things I talked to her about were the things I needed to say."

At times, the music or television shows that played in the background became foregrounded in the peer response discussion. For example, [Session 7] as Amy Jo (the responder) reviews a paper about a short story, she interrupts her discussion of the main character to comment on the merits of VH1's "I Love the 90's," a show that has been playing in her room during the session, a show that

draws the writer's gaze several times too. Amy Jo admits that the television is distracting her as she says, "I can't think!"

Noise interference and casual interruptions are something students face when they work in the first-floor lounge also. While Autumn and James [Session 10] discuss Autumn's history essay, one of their friends disrupts the session to take their food order before going to McDonald's. Moments later, the cell phone of the McDonald's messenger rings, as James tries to read the history paper intently. Once again, toward the end of the session, somebody's cell phone rings, and Autumn laughs at this.

Clearly, this technology-rich environment and the multitasking behavior that arises as a result of it is unique to a residence-hall setting; it is a rare classroom in which students would be allowed to watch television or accept cell phone calls. But just because students in this study engaged in *technology-driven multitasking* during their peer response sessions, whereas they would not have in the classroom setting, does not make the behavior dangerous or necessarily inadvisable.

In an extensive study of media usage among American youths, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 30 percent of the participants surveyed "use media or talk on the

phone 'most of the time' they're doing homework, while another 31 percent say they do so 'some' of the time" (Kaiser Family Foundation, n.d.). Despite the prevalence of students engaging in technology-driven multitasking while also attempting academic tasks, the Kaiser study found no correlation between the amount of media use among young people and the grades they received in school. Drew Altman, Ph.D. and president/CEO of the Kaiser Family Foundation, said, "Multi-tasking is a growing phenomenon in media use and we don't know whether it's good or bad or both." (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005).

Similarly, a 2007 *Washington Post* story about teenagers who multitask while doing their homework noted that "researchers say there isn't any answer yet to whether multitasking helps, hurts or has no effect on teens' development" (Aratani). Furthermore, the article suggests that employers may expect the next generation of workers to show proficiency in technology-driven multitasking.

Johnson (2006) adds to the multitasking debate in his book *Everything bad is good for you: How today's popular culture is actually making us smarter.* As Johnson describes his Sleeper Curve theory, he argues that brain function and cognition often improve in technology-rich environments. Johnson notes, "Certain kinds of environments encourage

cognitive complexity; others discourage complexity" (p. 11). An important question raised by this ethnographic study is: for the students performing extracurricular peer response in a technology-rich environment, are they operating in an environment which encourages or discourages complexity of thought?

Johnson (2006) offers no definitive answers, yet he discusses some of the same concerns raised by the parents of multitasking teenagers (Aratani, 2007) and Kaiser Family Foundation (2005) scholars — concerns about whether multitasking encourages complex or surface-level thinking. Since it is unclear without further research whether performing peer response in a technology-rich environment is beneficial or detrimental, analysis in this study of extracurricular peer response sessions is presented here in as neutral a manner as possible.

Although Amy Jo is described above complaining that she "can't think" during her peer response session due to the distractions in the room, other writers and responders appear to multitask with ease. This is illustrated in Session 5.

Collaborative Learning

and Cable-Television Cooking

Session 5 captures a peer response session in the dorm room of twin brothers and roommates, Louis (the writer) and Rocco (the responder). As I observed when I conducted the follow-up interview, Louis and Rocco's room features Bob Marley posters and a swath of batik fabric hanging on the walls. A small mountain of dirty clothes accumulates in the corner, next to a six-foot folding table, piled high with books and papers.

At the beginning of Session 5, Rocco sits alone on the futon couch, reading his brother's literary analysis of *Death of a Salesman,* while Louis, the writer of the paper, sits at his desk studying for a chemistry exam, which is scheduled to begin in less than an hour. Toward the start of the session, Sara (Louis' girlfriend) enters their room. Louis stops studying, and the couple joins Rocco on the couch, all reading Louis' paper together. Louis' cell phone rings in the middle of the session; he answers it, holds a short conversation in which someone is looking to borrow his notes, and in less than 10 seconds, he refocuses his attention on the peer response session. This is just one instance of the students' ability to multitask without seeming to detract from their peer response efforts.

A few moments after Louis' cell phone conversation, all three participants discuss the Food Network program that has been playing on the television since their peer response session began. As their conversation weaves in and out of talking about the Southern cooking show and then talking about Louis' paper, their side comments do not pull them permanently off-topic. This excerpt shows how deftly the participants shift their conversation from their shared experience of the television program to the task of responding to Louis' text:

> Rocco: You have a quote in here, but you don't have it in [quote marks].
> Louis: Do I?
> Rocco: You have number 1858, you have the author and page number and everything.
> Louis: It's not a quote, though. I paraphrased that.
> Rocco: Oh.
> Sara: Do you know how to make gravy? I like gravy.
> Rocco: Isn't gravy . . .
> Louis [interrupting]: I don't know how to make gravy.
> Sara: [laughs]
> Rocco: The last paragraph is pretty good.
> Rocco: [reading from Louis' paper] *"Lack of understanding what the real world needs in being successful was the problem for Willy Loman."*
> Louis [reading his paper]: *"Lack of understanding what the real world needs in being . . ."*
> Sara: I wish I had been writing this [recipe] down. Because I can never make good chicken.
> Rocco [composing an alternative sentence aloud]: *"The lack of skills required by…"*
> Rocco [pauses and then he summarizes Louis' point to test his own understanding of the text]: Like basically, you can't get by in the real world with a smile and a lie.

Clearly, their conversation is off-topic — cooking chicken and gravy has nothing to do with Louis' paper about *Death of a Salesman*. Yet, Louis and Rocco remain focused on the paper, engaging in the type of peer response behavior compositionists advocate, such as "pointing" and "summarizing" (Elbow, 1998, pp. 85-87). Rocco identifies what he considers to be a particularly strong section of the paper by pointing to the last paragraph. This type of textually-specific comment is useful in peer response because it allows writers a glimpse at how real readers are likely to respond to their work. Also, when Rocco summarizes one of Louis' main ideas — that Willy Loman's understanding of how to succeed in life is superficial and incomplete — this provides confirmation to the writer that his audience is interpreting his words correctly.

In this exchange, Rocco and Louis also demonstrate Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development as they negotiate a shared understanding of how to cite sources accurately. For example, the responder (Rocco) informs the writer (Louis) that direct quotes require quotation marks. Then, the writer elicits more information. The responder informs the writer that this section of the paper contains a complete parenthetical citation, but lacks quote marks. Then, the writer informs the responder that

this particular sentence is a paraphrase of his source and not a direct quote (implying that even paraphrases require detailed citations). The responder's reply ("Oh") suggests that this is something he did not know.

This passage shows a high degree of collaboration (see "Effective Peer Response Defined for the Purpose of this Study," pp. 18-19) because the peer response pair avoids one-way communication, where one person directs the other person in comment after comment. Instead, Rocco and Louis balance their discussion with comments that inform one another about the writing process; they also elicit information about the writing process when there is something they do not understand or when it appears that they hold conflicting beliefs. In fact, Rocco and Louis' high degree of collaboration (i.e. their balance of Directing, Informing, and Eliciting comments) extends beyond this small passage discussed above and is evident throughout Session 5.

So, even though Rocco and Louis are doing peer response in a technology-rich environment and consequently multitasking between discussing the text and discussing a television show, there are also signs that meaningful collaboration takes place nevertheless. In fact, the group's technology-based multitasking can be seen as

providing the occasion for what I am referring to in this study as *bonding behavior.*

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Bonding Behavior and the Social Aspect

of Peer Response

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Bonding behavior occurs when participants engage in off-topic discourse that appears to divert attention from the peer response session, yet instead of serving as a digression, these conversations reinforce the students' shared experience. Throughout the peer response sessions in this study, bonding behavior appears repeatedly, and it is not just in response to an external stimulus like the Food Network program described above — sometimes bonding behavior is in the form of laughter, a joke, or gossip; sometimes it is in the form of praise when a responder compliments a writer; sometimes it is a self-deprecating comment; or sometimes it involves commiseration about the academic experience.

Follow-up interviews with the study participants suggest that students do not view their off-topic discourse as a distraction, but rather as a way to bolster the sense of rapport they have with their chosen peer response partners. In these extracurricular peer response sessions, the prevalence of bonding behavior and the importance

students say they place on the need for strong social connections in their peer response partnerships suggests a major difference between extracurricular and classroom peer response, and these findings forecast wider implications for classroom peer response pedagogy (see Chapter V).

When asked to compare in-class peer response to extracurricular peer response, Louis and Sara say that trust plays an important role in their extracurricular peer response sessions and that in-class sessions sometimes feel as if they are exercises done only to please the teacher.

Sara says that part of the reason why in-class peer response seems more like a chore than a worthwhile endeavor is that "normally you really don't know the person [whose paper] you are checking, so you really don't care if they're changing the paper or not." She acknowledges that when Louis asks her to review a paper she pays more attention and offers more in-depth depth feedback than she would to one of her classroom peers because she wants Louis to do well on his paper and learn from his mistakes. In class, she says she goes through the peer response faster and perhaps less carefully because "[I] just want to get out and get finished."

Louis says that, in his experience, in-class peer response sometimes has a competitive edge to it because

students are jockeying for their teacher's approval; this is something that is not a factor in extracurricular peer response because the teacher is absent — both physically and metaphorically absent, since a teacher is rarely informed by the writer when extracurricular peer response has occurred.

Before Louis' peer response session with Rocco and Sara [Session 5], Louis had his paper reviewed in class by a fellow student. (The syllabus for Louis' English 102 class indicates that "rough draft feedback," an in-class peer response session, is scheduled for the class meeting prior to each paper's due date). The student with whom Louis was paired for the *Death of a Salesman* paper was "a kid that kind of gets on my nerves because everything I say in class, he likes to contradict and makes me sound stupid," Louis says.

Because of the source, Louis dismissed the in-class responder's advice. Since Louis' in-class peer response session was outside the bounds of this study, we do not know whether the advice Louis disregarded might have been worthwhile. Still, we know that Louis lacked trust in his in-class responder's abilities or motives; Louis failed to establish a strong social connection with this particular responder; and, therefore, Louis decided to ignore the

responder's feedback completely, suggesting that in-class peer response in this instance was, to a certain extent, futile.

Contrasting Session 5 with students' experience of traditional classroom peer response highlights the importance of building strong social connections between peer response partners. However, it is overly simplistic to assume that extracurricular peer response automatically engenders strong social connections between peer response partners and that classroom peer response inhibits such rapport. As we see in Session 7, less than effective peer response sessions can occur in extracurricular settings too, especially if the social connection between writer and responder is weak.

### Hurry Up and Read:
### Limited Social Connection

Certainly, the bond between peer response partners varies greatly; not all peer response partners share as much trust as twin brothers might, even when those partners work as autonomous pairs in an extracurricular setting. In Session 7, Amy Jo reviews Tyrone's literary analysis of the short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" During this session, we see two students who do not know

one another very well, engaging in peer response, and the result is a session in which collaboration appears stunted.

Tyrone is a chronic peer responder, someone who seeks feedback on his papers in almost a compulsive manner. He says that he typically asks seven or eight different people, outside of class, to review his work, "especially if it's a major paper." His rationale is that multiple peer response sessions increase the likelihood of him receiving a higher grade, and he feels more confident if several people have read his paper before he submits it for his teacher's evaluation.

Tyrone selects respondents based on proximity: "I usually just pass [my paper] around the cluster. Everybody proofreads[4] it and I do the same for everybody else." He says he figures that "even if they're [an idiot], they might catch something" that needs to be revised.

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[4]    Although Tyrone uses the term "proofreading" and appears to equate it with "peer response," he reveals in his follow-up interview a broader definition of peer response. He says that responders often bring up issues related to the content of his paper; for example, responders might put brackets around large parts of his paper if they find a certain section confusing. Tyrone explains, "They say, 'What's this [mean]? It seems out of place." Tyrone says this is a helpful part of peer response because it helps him revise when readers point out to him "something that doesn't make sense."

> Tyrone: A lot of times the hardest thing in a paper is that
>       you're trying to explain something and in your head it
>       might make sense, but when other people read it, they're
>       like, "What the f---?" And then you just have to find a way
>       to explain it better.

Amy Jo perceives Tyrone's indiscrimination when selecting peer response partners as well as his somewhat dismissive attitudes toward his partners' feedback, and she says that at the time of the session, she felt misused.

First of all, Amy Jo says that she and her roommate barely knew Tyrone before the session.[5] Amy Jo says, "We don't really talk to him that much. He came to us because we were across the hall and I think he knocked on *everybody's* door" [emphasis hers]. Secondly, she says that Tyrone seemed to take her time for granted. He stopped by Amy Jo's room earlier that day, asking if she would look at his paper. They made arrangements to hold a peer response session that afternoon, but Tyrone had fallen asleep, missed the appointed time, and when he stopped by her room again, he was two hours late. Amy Jo and her roommate had been on their way out of the residence hall to go to the gym at the time, but agreed to stay behind to help him Tyrone, partly because he seemed so anxious about his paper.

Describing her high school training in peer response as "really intensive," Amy Jo says that whenever she

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[5]    I asked Amy Jo whether she thought Tyrone approached her for help because he knew that she was participating as a recorder in this ethnographic study. She said that Tyrone did not know about her involvement in the study until she informed him and asked whether he was willing to have his session taped.

engages in peer response, whether in-class or extracurricular, she typically evaluates the content of the text and "whether the paper flows[6]." However, for this session, she says she looked only for spelling and punctuation problems instead of larger issues of content because she says she felt the writer was rushing her, "And then he kept telling me, 'Well, I just want you to read [the paper]. I don't want you to do anything to it, just read it.'"

Amy Jo admits that she did not exert as much effort or provide as effective feedback as she typically would during a peer response session. But, she says she "didn't really feel bad about it" because the peer response session was more like a business transaction than a collaboration between two friends or classmates. She says, "It was more like, 'Get it done, Amy Jo.' It was kind of weird."

At several points in the session, Amy Jo tries to discuss Tyrone's analysis of the short story, yet his responses seem to inhibit conversation. For example:

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[6]      In follow-up interviews, several participants discuss looking at how well a paper "flows" when acting as peer responders (Amy Jo, Sara, and Louis). They explain that the term "flow" refers to the degree to which one sentence transitions smoothly to the next and the relevancy of each paragraph to the paper's thesis. While the students' use of "flow" might strike writing instructors as an imprecise way to evaluate writing, to these participants, "flow" is used as a condensation term to refer to matters of organization, clarity, and content.

Amy Jo: This sentence you say where "Connie wanted the same praise from her mother and therefore wanted to be more like an adult by shadowing her sister"?

Tyrone: Mmmhmm

Amy Jo: [As far as] Connie, how did she shadow her sister?

Tyrone: You'll see. Just keep reading, like, the next sentence.

Amy Jo: I didn't really think she [tried to shadow her sister]. I'll keep reading.

Tyrone: Okay.

Amy Jo: "Secrets?" She secretly wanted to be like her sister?

Amy Jo: Oh, I see. Oh, I never even thought about that.

Tyrone: The story creates a lot of different meanings

In Tyrone's paper, he argues that the main character, Connie, a popular and beautiful teenager, secretly emulates her homely, more responsible sister — a contestable interpretation that many readers would refute. When Amy Jo elicits a more detailed explanation of his position (she asks, "How did [Connie] shadow her sister?"), Tyrone rebuffs her request for more information, and directs her to "just keep reading." Then, he closes off the conversational thread about Connie and her sister by saying, "The story creates a lot of different meanings." As a responder, Amy Jo decides that questioning Tyrone's claim about the main character is not worthwhile since the writer has made it clear that he is not interested in hearing her feedback on this point.

Several factors appear to have hindered collaboration during this peer response session: (1) Amy Jo and Tyrone had not interacted with one another much prior to the session, so they lacked a foundation for mutual trust; (2) Amy Jo (the responder) felt rushed for time because Tyrone approached her about the session at a time when she had already made plans to go the gym, and because Tyrone (the writer) told her during the session that she should not stop to discuss the paper with him, for he wanted her to continue reading without pause; and (3) Tyrone seemed uninterested in discussing the possibility of any major revisions, and instead appeared only to want confirmation that his paper was adequate. Since Amy Jo and Tyrone failed to engage in bonding behavior before the session or during it, the dialogic nature of peer response was eroded (as well as the more relaxed nature that seems to be characteristic of extracurricular peer response in this study).

Ironically, in Tyrone's follow-up interview, when discussing the differences between classroom and extracurricular peer response sessions, he identified trust and friendship as critical components to peer response, yet he appears unaware that his session with Amy Jo lacked this

relationship dynamic. In the follow-up interview, Tyrone

says:

> People in class aren't really your friends, so I feel
> like sometimes in class, people just try to get
> through as quick as they can so they can leave or
> whatever, instead of genuinely trying to read and give
> you their opinion. Your friends, if you ask them to
> read it, they will read it for you completely and
> spend a little time on it.

Not only does Tyrone misjudge his social connection to

Amy Jo, he also mistakenly equates the length of time peer

response partners spend with one another with the quality

of feedback a writer receives. The session between Tyrone

and Amy Jo lasted 25 minutes, an average length for the

peer response sessions in this study (see Appendix E). Amy

Jo spent the time necessary to read through Tyrone's paper

completely and consider the possible gaps in his argument

carefully, but perhaps the conditions needed for Amy Jo to

express her opinion freely were missing, whether that was

because of the relationship foundation, the constraints

Tyrone placed on her, or some combination of the these

factors.

As Sara mentioned earlier (see p. 98 of this chapter),

highly collaborative peer response sessions are more likely

to occur when writers and responders share a strong social

connection. In fact, she talks about the degree of

investment in the peer response process in terms of

"caring" — caring about the text and caring about the participants involved. These findings regarding motivation and peer response have pedagogical implications in terms of how writing instructors conduct classroom peer response sessions. If teachers need to trigger a sense of altruism among students to make them care about the peer response process, this suggests a shift in the way many teachers conduct classroom peer response, which is to tie students' peer response performance to a grade. Altruism is an intrinsic motivator, whereas grades provide an extrinsic motivator. Another pedagogical implication for teachers employing peer response pedagogy is that it may be necessary to incorporate community-building in the first-year writing classroom, if students are to build the types of social connections that lead to greater collaboration (see Chapter V).

Just as the degree of bonding between peer response participants affects collaboration, which was evident in Sessions 5 and 7, the degree of writer involvement does too. Since teachers expect writers to maintain authorial control when peer response is used in the classroom, and since a high level of writer involvement is necessary if the writer is to make meaningful revisions to her text, this aspect of extracurricular peer response is important

to investigate if we are to evaluate the degree to which true collaboration is achieved in this setting. We see evidence of active writer involvement in Session 5.

## Author in the Middle:

## Questioning and Listening

Session 5, between the writer Louis and his two responders, Rocco and Sara, illustrates the importance of bonding behavior and shows that effective peer response could take place even amid the chaos of a technology-rich environment. This session is also instructive, however, because it provides us with a critical incident of a writer exercising authorial control.

As Rocco and Louis discuss the plot of *Death of a Salesman*, which they have both read in separate English 102 classes, Rocco questions whether Louis' claim that "Willy had no father growing up" is true. Louis is attentive to his responder's concerns about Willy's father, yet this writer still asks for proof. Louis asks, "Where is [Willy's father] in the story, though?" Rocco reads from the primary source, the play, and convinces Louis that this part of his draft is misleading. Louis responds, "I should really put in a quote or something, explaining that [Willy] can't remember his father. I should write that down." So, after

considering the perspective of his peer responder, Louis revises his paper and adopts a more nuanced position: he goes from saying that Willy's father had a non-existent role in Willy's early life to saying that Willy's father had a minimal role in Willy's early life.

Another example of Louis' authorial control occurs when Rocco urges Louis to attend to the rhetorical context of the paper. Rocco advises him not to use the word "nerd" when referring to the play's bookish character, the Lomans' neighbor Bernard, because the pejorative term "nerd" may offend Louis' teacher — the reader with the ultimate responsibility of grading the paper. The following exchange between Louis and Rocco occurs as Louis elicits more information from his responder:

> Rocco: You've got to remember who your audience is, you know. Like, I don't know if you want to use that term.
> Louis: What term?
> Rocco: Nerd.
> Louis: But it was a direct quote, like "nerd." I could actually put the quote.
> Rocco: Actually, I think it says "anemic."
> Louis: "Anemic," oh yeah.

These exchanges show that Louis' responders encourage him to engage in a more radical re-seeing of his paper, instead of concentrating exclusively on local issues such as grammar and mechanics. The participants in Session 5 are

grappling with the central issues of the author's text, such as writing content (the accuracy of the author's literary interpretation) and writing context (attention to how tone and word choice might affect one's audience).

Whether the participants in this session are tackling stylistic concerns, rhetorical strategies, or questions of accuracy and clarity, the author, Louis, consistently maintains control over his text. He carefully considers the advice of his peer responders, and at the same time he follows Elbow's advice (1998) for writers to avoid being "tyrannized by what [responders] say" (p. 104). Louis uses peer response as an occasion to learn more about writing. By questioning his responders, he expands his knowledge about writing and he expands the variety of tools in his "rhetorical toolbox" (Murray, 1968, p. 73). Louis explains his authorial stance when he undergoes peer response:

> I have to have a reason why I should believe [my responders] over what I believe. Why should I change what I said to what they said? Like, give me a good reason why I should change the way I stated it. Usually, they do [tell me], and usually I *do* change it. If it's a  mistake, then I'll admit it.

When Louis questions his responders, he learns new writing techniques and gains greater rhetorical flexibility; however, his active engagement in the peer response process also aids in the education of his peers.

For example, in another portion of Session 5, Louis

challenges the "absolute" writing rules his responders,

Rocco and Sara, seem to espouse, and when Louis does this,

Rocco and Sara soften their warnings and acknowledge the

contextualized nature of writing. In the process of sharing

their writing ideologies and experiences of their prior

classroom writing instruction, all three participants

expand their knowledge about writing. The following passage

illustrates the collaborative nature of the session:

> Sara: You should never say "it" — you need to clarify.
> Louis [mockingly]: All right, you should never say
>     "it" or "because" or "but" . . .
> Sara [interrupting]: No you shouldn't!
> Louis: Why not?!
> Sara: They're stupid words.
>                          . . .
>
> Rocco: Uh, you start out a sentence with "but." That's
>     generally not a good idea.
> Louis: Yeah? I don't think I was ever taught that —
>     not to use "but."
> Rocco: No?
> Sara: I mean, there are exceptions…
> Rocco: Some people use ["but" and "and" at the
>     beginning] and I don't like it, but . . .
> Sara: "And" at the beginning of a sentence? Ewww.
> Rocco: Some people do it, and I'm just like,
>     well . . . And my teacher told me if you don't do
>     it *a lot* . . .
> Sara: I didn't know it was allowed at *all*.

Louis and Sara both say they have learned something

new during this session: Louis has never heard that some

people believe sentences should avoid beginning with

conjunctions such as "but" and "and," while Sara learns

that there is not a universally-accepted ban on beginning

with these words. Both are learning to navigate the

situational and gray world of writing techniques, and one

could argue that their lessons were precipitated by Louis'

assertion of authorial control.

## Conclusion

The critical incidents presented above offer a glimpse

into the previously hidden phenomenon of extracurricular

peer response sessions occurring in a first-year residence

hall. This study generated revealing data about the

location, timing, and content of extracurricular peer

response sessions. However, the most significant findings

in this study relate to the importance of social

connections between peer response partners.

Just as Spear (1993b) discovered in her comparative

study of first-year- and upperclass- peer response groups,

peer response partners who developed a sense of rapport

tend to perform more effective peer response. Spear

describes the practices of her student peer responders, who

have worked together at least five times throughout the

semester:

> By now you hear more give and take between writer and reader. Writers retain ownership of the draft, but readers are able to justify their suggestions on the basis of their needs as readers. Writers talk more about what they are trying to do and readers do more than give empty admonitions. (p. 256)

Similarly, participants in this study have shown by their strong social connections (e.g. Louis, Rocco, and Sara in Session 5) or their lack of strong social connections (e.g. Amy Jo and Tyrone in Session 7) that compositionists and writing teachers should not ignore the social context between peer response partners because it plays an important role in whether students are able to achieve effective peer response.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS


Summary of the Findings

As I discussed in Chapter II, peer response is often
described in the literature as either a time-saving device
for teachers (Bouton & Tutty, 1975; Wagner, 1975), a
strategy used to improve student writers' skills of
detection and diagnosis (Flower et al., 1986; Macrorie,
1984; Murray, 1968; Strout, 1970), or a dynamic process in
which knowledge about writing is socially constructed
(Bruffee, 1984/1995; Elbow, 1998; Gere, 1987; Spear,
1993a). The varied descriptions of peer response listed
above derive from teacher ideologies of peer response. To
this conversation, we can now add a student perspective of
peer response ideology, an ideology we can begin to
investigate as we observe the naturalistic behavior of an
extracurricular-peer response-community of practice (see
pp. 5-6, Chapter I).

One of the defining characteristics of communities of
practice is their staying power within an organization,
"whether or not the organization recognizes them" (Wenger
et al., 2002, p. 12). This ethnographic study takes the
first step in recognizing the existence of extracurricular-

peer response-communities of practice within a residence hall.

Now we can consider whether there is anything writing teachers can or should do with this acknowledgement. Within the classroom, are there ways that writing teachers can support extracurricular-peer response-communities of practice and help them to thrive? Even though Wenger et al. (2002) argue that communities of practice require a level of "informality and autonomy" (p. 12), is it possible to teach students how to approach extracurricular peer response more effectively, or would teacher intervention thwart the community of practice's efforts? These are difficult questions and additional research studies must be undertaken before they can be answered. However, this study highlights the need to investigate the connection between classroom and extracurricular peer response further.

Another connection to be made when comparing the behavior typical of a community of practice to the behavior manifested by participants in this study is that a strong social connection among peers seems important. Wenger et al. (2002) note that members of a community of practice appear to find fulfillment in being in one another's company and that this social interaction between members

serves more than a functional role. Wenger et al. (2002) explain:

> However they accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people. (p. 5)

Similarly, based on an analysis of peer response transcripts and follow-up interviews, participants in this study defined their peer response work in social as well as academic terms. Their bonding behavior, which manifested itself as laughter, praise, inside jokes, or stories about past experiences (see Appendix D, p. 165), suggests that members of this extracurricular-peer response-community of practice also found enjoyment in "belonging to an interesting group of people" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 5).

This study's findings indicate that a strong social connection between peer response partners is necessary so that both writer and responder are invested in the process. If peer response partners lack this connection, or it is weak, then the opportunity for social construction of knowledge is hampered. The importance of bonding behavior

has pedagogical implications for writing teachers because it indicates that students need an opportunity to develop rapport with their peer response partners before, during, and after they engage in peer response.

This is not to say that a classroom setting, by its nature, inhibits students from building these important social connections, nor is it to say that residence halls or other extracurricular sites are the only places where students are free to build a sense of rapport. That would be a false dichotomy, and it would ignore the contextualized nature of classrooms and extracurricular learning environments.

However, the findings in this study call into question popular classroom peer response practices such as teacher manipulation of peer response groups — through random pairing of writers and responders or assigning weak writers to work alongside stronger ones. Not only should teachers consider allowing students more autonomy in choosing peer response partners, it is also possible that community-building activities may prove to be a useful part of peer response training so that students can select their partners with more intentionality and so students get an early opportunity to begin building social connections with their classmates (and future peer response partners). Also,

teachers might reinterpret off-topic student discourse during classroom peer response in light of the significant social purpose such discourse can serve.

Finally, the naturalistic peer response behavior of students in this study may change the way writing center administrators think about scheduling and staffing, because the timing of extracurricular peer response sessions suggests students' preferences for working on their papers in the evening. Also, the occurrence of extracurricular peer response in a first-year residence hall shows that satellite writing centers located within student housing may be useful. Furthermore, since many of the study participants have shown they can tolerate, and in fact prefer, working in technology-rich environments, writing center administrators might explore how they can design spaces that allow students to multitask with ease.

Implications for Classroom Peer Response

*Bonding Behavior and the Selection*

*of Peer Response Partners*

As mentioned earlier in Chapter II, teachers practice classroom peer response in a variety of ways, especially when it comes to forming writing groups. Some teachers let students choose the peers with whom they want to work

(Beaven, 1977; Styslinger, 1999); other teachers put the

groups together themselves (George, 1984; Jackson, 2004;

Kraemer, 1993; Reimer, 1993). Still others require students

to remove their names from their papers, to allow writers a

sense of anonymity as their work is critiqued by the entire

class (Bellas, 1970; Putz, 1970; Reimer, 1993).

    Given the apparent link between successful peer

response and the ability of students to form strong social

connections with their peer response partners, teacher

manipulation of response groups is inadvisable. It is

logical to assume that there is a greater likelihood that

students will build trusting relationships when they are

free to choose those with whom they will collaborate

instead of having that choice forced upon them. Therefore,

students should have autonomy in selecting their own peer

response partners because writers who have positive, or at

least neutral, attitudes toward working with their partners

will be more receptive to feedback during the peer response

session (whereas the inverse was true with Louis and his

teacher-assigned responder, see pp. 99-100, Chapter IV).

    Still, it is important to note that student autonomy

alone is not enough — autonomy must be paired with

intentionality when students choose peer response partners.

That is, students need to make informed choices about the

partners they are choosing, and this should be based on some prior contact with their classmates so they have had time to engage in the type of bonding behavior that will form the foundation for their collaborative relationships.

Otherwise, if students choose their partners haphazardly, as was the case when chronic-peer-responder Tyrone chose Amy Jo as his partner during Session 7, they may not be invested in one another's learning processes enough to offer thorough and honest feedback. As Amy Jo explains in her follow-up interview why she did not express herself more vehemently when questioning one of the main points in Tyrone's paper, "I didn't really know him. I think that makes a difference too." If Amy Jo is right, and "knowing" your peer response partner does make a difference, then how can teachers help their students achieve stronger social connections, even before the first time students work as peer response partners?

## *Building Classroom-Community*

One way that teachers can facilitate student selection of peer response partners is by guiding students through community-building activities, which approximate the type of bonding behavior shown in the extracurricular peer response sessions of this study. These activities would

provide students with prior social contact between classmates so that they can make intentional choices about prospective peer response partners.

Although there is a clear correlation between the type of bonding behavior exhibited during extracurricular peer response sessions and the desired effects of classroom community-building activities, it is presumptive to think that teachers could replicate in the classroom the organic, naturalistic behavior displayed by students in their residence hall. Community-building activities must be incorporated in the classroom without wiping out student differences, over-simplifying the complexities of human relationships, or co-opting the extracurricular behavior of this study's participants and claiming it for pedagogical purposes.

Tobin (1993) cautions that, in the past, the field of composition has "romanticized and reified the notion of a decentered, supportive, collaborative writing group without paying enough attention to what sorts of peer relationships inhibit writing and what sorts foster it" (p. 90). Tobin suggests that although strengthening student-student and teacher-student relationships is within the jurisdiction of a composition classroom, teachers must plan community-

building activities carefully and reflectively if such

strategies are to work. Tobin notes:

> Some classroom teachers simply announce to their
> students, 'In this course you will become a community
> of writers,' but then do little more to make that
> happen than tell their students to sit in a circle,
> encourage them to learn one another's first names, or
> ask them to respond to one another's essays in small
> groups. (p. 91)

Like Tobin, I am advocating a richer understanding of

classroom social connections than represented by the use of

traditional icebreaker games, the type of get-to-know-you-

games Tobin disparages. Not only is a classroom setting

unique because of its academic emphasis, but each classroom

setting is also highly contextualized; therefore, teachers

must embrace an adaptable pedagogy that is responsive to

institutional constraints, the structure of the course and

course syllabus, and the competing needs of students within

the class.

Carbone (1993) discusses how he incorporates

community-building activities into his lesson plans on the

first day of the semester. He explains that these

activities are designed to work in the specific context of

his computer-based composition classroom, and he makes

these activities integrative, not extraneous, to the

course. He helps students form strong social connections by

making them responsible for one another's learning and

providing them with what he calls "common experiences." For example, when the first student enters the classroom, Carbone demonstrates how to log into the computer network, how to find an assigned writing prompt, and how to save a response once the student has written it. Then, he tells the first student to share these instructions with the next student who enters. This starts a chain reaction in which one student teaches the next student, and so on until all class members are equally knowledgeable. Carbone describes the scene:

> Soon the room is full of the clacking of keys and the murmurs of consultations, and what at first glance may have seemed a sterile authoritarian environment becomes a place humane and sharing, made more easily so by chairs with wheels, so students can scoot over to one another's screens.

Clearly, Carbone has decentered the classroom in a meaningful way and encouraged a type of low-stakes social construction of knowledge that will lay the foundation for future peer response sessions.

The next pair of community-building activities Carbone uses at this first class meeting correlates even more closely to the type of bonding behavior seen in my study. First, Carbone directs the entire class to stand up, all at the same time, and read aloud the writing histories they have just written. Then, they discuss on an electronic

message board the common experience of standing with their

classmates to share their writing publicly. On several

levels, these exercises contribute to classroom-community

because they promote a sense of intimacy. The students have

the opportunity to see their classmates without the

obstruction of a desk or a computer; therefore, they are

more likely to recognize one another at the next class

meeting or if they see one another outside of class. Also,

Carbone unites the class in the common experience of

feeling uncomfortable around one's peers — both because

they have to read their own words aloud and because it

disrupts the classroom norm of sitting behind a desk.

In the extracurricular peer response sessions, bonding

behavior manifested itself when students discussed the

common experience of a television show or a song that had

been playing in their residence hall room. Another

variation of the common-experience-based bonding behavior

occurred when participants shared stories about their past

(see p. 89, Chapter IV, regarding Tamara and her father) or

when they commiserated about the academic experience.

Carbone's writing history assignment encourages students to

talk about their past instruction, and the subsequent

electronic discussion about his students' discomfort during

the read-aloud exercise allows them to commiserate about an academic experience.

Carbone is but one example of a writing instructor who pays attention to context when incorporating classroom-building exercises into his syllabus. Several compositionists (Fishman & McCarthy, 1995; Reimer, 1993; Windham, 2007) have provided instructive examples for how teachers can help their students create strong social connections, which, in turn, improve the students' chances for effective peer response.

### *Teacher Interpretation of Off-Topic Discourse*

Much of the literature about peer response, and group work in general, suggests that students who engage in off-topic discourse during collaborative assignments take their work less than seriously. Some teachers express frustration when they experiment with collaborative pedagogy and then discover their students talking about upcoming social plans or other topics unrelated to the assigned collaborative task. However, similar to Brooke's findings (1987) from his exploration of student underlife, the transcripts of extracurricular peer response sessions in this study point to an alternative explanation for students' off-topic discourse. As discussed earlier, it appears that bonding

behavior plays a critical role in strengthening the social connection between writer and responder, and engaging in off-topic discourse is one way that bonding behavior manifests itself. Off-topic discourse performs a meaningful function within the context of a peer response session, and we can see from Session 5, during Louis, Rocco, and Sara's discussion of a Food Network program (see p. 94, Chapter IV), that effective peer response occurs even when students engage in conversations that teachers might interpret as frivolous.

Not only is the presence of off-topic discourse in extracurricular peer response sessions significant because it highlights the value of strong social connections between writers and responders, but it is also significant because it highlights a disconnect between teacher ideology and student ideology in regard to how peer response should be performed. Brooke (1987) discovers a similar disconnect between teachers' emphasis on maintaining order in the classroom and students' emphasis on maintaining an identity independent from the classroom, an identity which he calls their "underlife."

According to Brooke (1987), the concept of student underlife challenges teacher ideology of the "'good student' identity." He explains:

> In a school classroom, for example, prompt and accurate completion of tasks set by the teacher carries with it a "good student" identity, and a student who always complies pleasantly will be understood as smart, well-mannered, possibly a teacher's pet. (p. 143)

This definition of what it means to be a "good student" (from a teacher's perspective) correlates closely with teacher ideology about proper classroom peer response, which includes the expectation that students' attention will remain focused on evaluating one another's texts, and that all group members will remain equally engaged throughout the entire process.

Brooke (1987) points out that students engage in off-topic discourse for a variety of reasons the classroom teacher might not expect. For example, he says that when he observed a group of students giggling and then investigated what prompted their outburst, he learned that their laughter was in response to one of their peer's jokes, but it was a joke that directly related to the course content their teacher had been presenting (p. 145).

Part of the reason why Brooke was able to gain rare insight into student underlife was due to his role as a participant-observer. He notes, "I was able to hear and record many behaviors I am unable to attend to while teaching my own courses" (p. 144). Similarly, I was able to

gain rare insight into students' extracurricular peer response practices because of my reliance on student recorders who lived in a first-year residence hall. Both my study and Brooke's study uncovered an important divide between the way teachers view off-topic discourse and the underlying reasons why students engage in off-topic discourse. It is important for teachers to reconsider their understanding of off-topic discourse during classroom peer response sessions. Teachers need to be aware that incidences of off-topic discourse during classroom peer response do not signify a failure of collaborative pedagogy, and they need to remember that off-topic discourse is often tied to the bonding behavior necessary for peer response partners to build strong social connections.

Implications for Writing Center Administration

*Bonding Behavior and the Writer/Peer Tutor*

*Relationship*

If, as this study implies, strong social connections between writers and responders are important to maximize collaboration and the social construction of knowledge, then it is even more imperative for writing center administrators to devote a good deal of attention to the

interactions between writers and peer tutors. Tutor training books often emphasize the importance of putting the writer at ease at the beginning of a writing center session (Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2006, chap. 3), and the process is often described as one where the tutor makes an effort to greet a writer with a smile, the tutor introduces himself or herself, and then the pair informally discusses the writer's goals and particular writing task. Setting up for the session typically takes 5 to 10 minutes at most, and whether or not writers and tutors engage in the type of bonding behavior I have described in this study (commiserating about the academic experience, self-deprecating comments, jokes, etc.) depends on the context of each conversation and the personalities of each writer and tutor.

I am not suggesting that bonding behavior is an element we should require in each writing center session, nor do I think we should quantify how much bonding behavior should be considered sufficient. However, it is important that writing center tutors do more than proceed through a series of prescribed steps when developing rapport with writing center clients. As a field, writing center professionals need to see if there are ways to provide for common experiences between writers and peer tutors. That

might mean that tutors emphasize their experiences as writers/students who have struggled with difficult writing projects, a technique that relates to bonding behavior in this study, whereby participants commiserated about the academic experience. Or it might mean that writing center administrators need to think in new ways about how to approach community-building between peer tutors and potential writing center clients before those clients come to us for their first session.

The latter suggestion presents special challenges to writing centers that classroom writing instructors do not face. The classroom is a closed community in that the instructor knows from the beginning of the semester who is on the class roster, and in general, the members of the class remain the same for several months. In writing centers, particularly those where clients visit the center voluntarily, it is unknown which students will choose to visit the center during any given semester. Therefore, writing center administrators are unable to gather all potential clients, introduce them to the entire writing center staff, and provide both parties with common experiences resembling Carbone's classroom-community-building exercises.

Despite these difficulties, it is possible for writing centers to improve social connections between writers and peer tutors on a smaller scale. For example, writing centers might host a series of open houses, where the emphasis would be on providing tutors and potential clients with an opportunity to meet and become acquainted with one another. Other possibilities include social events for repeat clients and orientation sessions for first-year students.

Of course, further study on the benefits and disadvantages of such events is warranted, and individual writing centers would have to study what makes sense (or does not make sense) in the local context in which they operate.

*Locating Satellite Centers in Residence Halls*

Prior to this ethnographic study of extracurricular peer response, knowledge about student peer response sessions occurring in college residence halls was conveyed to teachers only anecdotally. Now that this study provides confirmation that extracurricular peer response does take place in first-year residence halls (though the study does not make claims as to how widespread the phenomenon),

writing centers might look for ways to support the work students are already doing on their own.

In this study, students chose their peer response partners based on not only trust, but also proximity — whoever was close by when the writer needed feedback often became the responder. Since writing center administrators typically name student convenience as one of the most critical considerations when selecting a center's location, it appears that residence halls may be worthy sites for centers looking to offer satellite services. Several writing centers have already established residence hall satellites, including those at Bowling Green State University ("Satellite Hours," n.d.),  Purdue University ("Writing Lab," August 20, 2007), the University of Mississippi ("Stockard-Martin," n.d.), the University of Nebraska-Lincoln ("Hours & Location, 2007), the University of Oklahoma ("Welcome!," 2007),  and the University of Wisconsin-Madison ("About the Writing," 2006).

According to the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005), campuses with supportive writing centers (pp. 185-187) and supportive residence life departments (p. 257-259) boast higher levels of student retention and student engagement. The fact that both writing centers and

residence life departments are emphasized in the DEEP study

suggests an important nexus between academics and residence

life. Kuh et al. (2005) note that "the residence halls can

be an important locus of support and intellectual vitality,

which can have a significant influence — for better or

worse — on the quality of campus life for everyone" (p.

257).

Writing centers, which already do so much to

contribute to the intellectual vitality of campus life,

might do well to partner with residence life departments

through the creation of satellite centers.

*Tutoring in a Technology-Rich Setting*

Since many of the participants engaging in

extracurricular peer response sessions have shown that they

can tolerate, and in fact prefer, working in technology-

rich environments, writing center administrators might

explore how to design spaces that allow students to

multitask with ease. For many years, writing centers have

used couches and plants to create a welcoming and informal

learning environment for students (Clark, 1993, p. 106;

Harris, M., 1993, p. 4-6; Lotto, 1993, p. 83-84). M. Harris

says that the Purdue University Writing Lab has an open

design "to encourage a sense of community and interaction"

(p. 4). She describes how the lab's physical space reinforces the goals of collaborative pedagogy:

> The room is also a mix of comfortable, old donated couches, tables, plants, posters, coffeepots, a recycling bin for soda cans and paper, and even a popcorn machine, all of which signal (we hope) that this mess is also a friendly, nonthreatening, nonclassroom environment where conversation and questions can fly from one table to another. (p. 4-6)

Today's students, as a whole, are more comfortable working in a technology-rich environment than were previous generations (Aratani, February 26, 2007). Whereas writing centers in previous decades differentiated themselves from traditional classroom spaces with plants, posters, popcorn, and couches, perhaps it is time for writing center administrators to consider how to incorporate new media forms into the design of modern-day writing centers. Yes, writing centers may become noisier places if students answer cell phone calls or glance at the television during a tutoring session, and, yes, it is possible that such interruptions will sometimes distract writers and peer tutors to their detriment. But, participants in this study of extracurricular peer response have shown that collaboration can flourish in technology-rich environment,

and therefore, writing center administrators should feel
free to experiment with different media forms to find out
which ones will work within the local context of their
particular center.


Conclusion

Highberg, Moss, & Nicolas (2004) note the role that
context plays on writing group practices:

> Every writing group is a socially constructed entity
> with language at its core, and through the process of
> interacting, each group influences the writing of its
> members. These constraints as well as the uniqueness
> of each group are important sites of scholarly inquiry
> that, when investigated, can provide insight, for
> teachers, writing center staff, and group members,
> into making writing groups maximally effective in
> whatever context they operate. (p. 2)

Their words serve as a reminder to teachers to pay
attention to the "who" and "where" aspects of writing
groups inside and outside the classroom.

Prior to this ethnography of peer response in a first-
year residence hall, the extracurricular peer response
practices of college students had been mostly hidden, even
though teachers heard anecdotally that such sessions were
taking place outside of the classroom. Results from this
study highlight how important it is for teachers and
compositionists to understand the social context of student

peer response sessions, because there is an apparent link between the peer response partners' social connection and the degree of effectiveness they are able to achieve during their sessions.

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Appendix A

**OBSERVATION NOTES**

**Date**_____

**Writer**_____
**Responder**_____

**Location**_____

**Start time:**_____
**Stop time:**_____

**Describe the Setting**
Background noise? Interruptions? Other people in the room?
Paint the scene.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

**Non-verbal clues**
Where are the participants sitting? At desks, on beds, or
on the floor? Describe their non-verbal interaction with as
much detail as possible.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

(You can continue writing on the back if you need more
space)

Appendix B

**Starting a Session:**

- Remind participants that their peer response doesn't have to be all business. They should talk as they normally would and be themselves. Conversation can stray away from discussion of the paper — that's okay.
- Remind them that if they become uncomfortable with what's on the tape, they can stop it at any time.

**Follow these steps:**

1. Make sure the VOR button on the side of the recorder is OFF (pushed all the way to one side).
2. Put tape recorder between partners and push **RECORD**.
3. Have each partner say his/her name and have someone state the date of the recording.
4. **STOP** the tape. **REWIND** it. **REPLAY** it to make sure the recorder is working.
5. **STOP** the tape and push **RECORD** again. The partners should start their session.
6. Move into a corner of the room and sit quietly so you blend into the background. If the partners try to involve you, gently tell them to ignore your presence.
7. Take observation notes and keep an eye on the time. You may have to flip the tape over during a lengthy session.

**Ending a Session:**

- If partners took notes or wrote on the paper during the session, ask them to indicate who wrote what. They can do this by writing their initials next to their comments. Or if one person did all of the writing, have them write their name with a quick note at the top of the paper.
- Ask the writer if his/her teacher gave any printed out assignments for the paper they just worked on. If there is one, ask for a copy.
- **GET A COPY** of the paper the partners just discussed.

- If partners did any part of their peer response over email (or IM) ask them to give you a copy of the messages.
- **PUT ALL COPIES IN THE ENVELOPE.**
- Without rewinding the tape, eject it. **WRITE THE NAME OF THE PARTNERS** and the date of the session on the front of the tape.
- **PUT THE TAPE IN THE ENVELOPE** along with the paper copies.
- Seal the envelope and email me so I can make arrangements to pick it up.
  PLEASE CONTACT ME WITHIN 48 HOURS AFTER THE SESSION.


**Taking Notes:**

Your notes will help me understand the context of the peer response session. Your observations give me additional insight into what I will hear on the tapes.

I am not looking for your judgments on how well you think the peer response is going. I need you to paint the atmosphere of the session because that is something that can only be observed by you — it won't come through on the tapes.
Here are some of the things you should focus on:

**Duration**
How long does the session last? Note the start time and the end time.

**Setting**
Describe room. Is there music playing? If so, what type? How loud? Is the TV on? If so, what show? How loud? Do participants seem to be watching TV during the session? Are the peer response partners alone in the room? Are they interrupted at any point (e.g. by a roommate or a phone call).

**Non-verbal clues**
Where are the participants sitting? At desks, on beds, or on the floor? Describe their non-verbal interaction with as much detail as possible. Are they laughing and acting friendly or are they more formal, taking on the roles of teacher and student?

**Ethics:**

Please be respectful of the participants' privacy. Do not discuss the peer response session you observed with anyone else. Do not discuss the content of the paper you heard being discussed with anyone else. Do not rewind the tape to replay what occurred during the session.

The fact that the participants are involved in the study is confidential. Their teachers do not know they are participating, so do not discuss what you heard or saw during your observation with anyone, including your teachers, your hallmates, and your RAs.

If a participant tells you that he/she wants to drop out of the study, assure them that all data involving their participation will be destroyed & CONTACT ME IMMEDIATELY.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding ethical procedures, please see me or email me.

Appendix C

Session 8

Writer: Louis

Responder: Sara


Writer and responder are boyfriend and girlfriend, respectively. Louis's paper is on the short story "Where are You Going, Where Have You Been?" by Joyce Carol Oates; the documented source paper is for English 102. Prior to session, Sara read paper. While Louis was on the computer, she marked it up. Then, they discussed the paper immediately after she read it. Their discussion starts at the beginning of the taped session].


W-IWX    Louis: I'm doing a critical review on Joyce
         Oates' character Connie and her actions.

R-IWP    Sara: That's a very boring title.

W-DWP    Louis: I'll fix the title.

R-BB     [Sara laughs]

W-IWX    Louis:  But  it  tells  you  everything  I'm  talking
         about.

R-IWX    Sara: Yeah, I know, but still the reader doesn't

> want to know everything you're talking about. That's the point of reading the paper. Why would you have a title saying everything your paper is about if you . . .

W-IWX     Louis [interrupting]: I know but . . .

R-EWX     Sara [interrupting]: Then why would the reader want to read that?

W-IWX     Louis: But the critics and and all that, like they . . .

R-DWX     Sara: You wanna make the reader want to read the paper. [Louis simultaneously says "the critics, the critics] That does not make me want to read the paper.

W-IWP     Louis: the critics have titles like that.

R-IWX     Sara: You're not a critic

W-IWX     Louis: I am being a critic. I am. I'm criticizing the "Where…" her….

R-IWP/R-BB Sara: Stupid title [laughs]

W-IWP     Louis: It's not a stupid title because…

R-BB      Sara: Anyway!

W-IWX     Louis: Alright. It's kind of like a scientific title because when you have to do lab reports and stuff, they have to be like three sentences long.

R-BB      Sara: I know, you're science man . . .

W-BB        Louis: Whatever, alright I'll fix the title if
            you want, to say, "Connie is a dirty slut."

R-BB        Sara: That works too.

W+R-BB      Louis: Okay. [Sara laughs]

R-IWP/R-r   Sara: Umm . . . but here you have "*if the story
            is not non-fiction*" [the paper shows that Sara
            crosses out "not" and "non" to leave only "if the
            story is fiction"]

W-H         Louis: Oh, I see so…

R-DWP       Sara: It should be "fiction…"

W-r         Louis [reads corrected version]: So it's "*even if
            the story is fiction.*"

R-IWP       Sara: It's a double-negative

Appendix D

| Code | Code Category | Explanation | Example |
|------|---------------|-------------|---------|
| IWP | Inform, writing practices | Deals with the individual textual features that such as how a paper is worded, issues of grammar, documentation, organization; does not deal with the text as a whole (i.e. issues such as audience, purpose, and tone). Writers might explain why they made specific choices as they wrote. Responders might summarize what they understood after reading a paper or part of a paper. | Responder says to writer: "You start out this paragraph talking about the allies of Germany and what Germany's reparations were." |
| IWC | Inform, writing content | Deals with the evidence presented in the text (i.e. the facts themselves, not the way they are presented or the wording). Writers might provide responders with background information. Responders might share a related fact. | Responder tells writer that the plot of the play is misrepresented in the paper being discussed: "Willy does have a father growing up." |

| IWX | Inform, writing context | Deals with the writing task as a whole, not its individual parts. Often focuses on constraints that shape the writer's task, such as the paper assignment, writing genre, teacher expectations, and grading criteria. | Writer explains to responder: "It's kind of like a scientific title because when you have to do lab reports and stuff, they have to be like three sentences long." |
|---|---|---|---|
| DWP | Direct, writing practices | Deals with partners giving one another direct advice about textual features such as organization, grammar, mechanics, and diction. This could be phrased as an order, as an option, or as a question; the comment can also be self-reflexive. Responders might offer specific advice, such as telling writers to reorganize or reword part(s) of the text. | Responder says to writer: "You might want to add one more sentence." |
| DWC | Direct, writing content | Deals with partners giving one another direct advice about evidence presented in the text (e.g. the accuracy of evidence or what | If a responder has expertise about the paper's subject, he or she might identify a |

| | | specific evidence should be added or deleted). This advice could be phrased as an order, as an option, or as a question; the comment can also be self-reflexive. | specific fact the writer could include to bolster the paper's argument. |
|---|---|---|---|
| DWX | Direct, writing context | Deals with partners giving one another direct advice about how to negotiate constraints that shape a writer's task. This could be phrased as an order, as an option, or as a question; the comment can also be self-reflexive. | Responder advises writer not to use the word "nerd" to refer to a smart character because it might offend the teacher who is issuing a grade: "Like, you've got to remember who your audience is, you know. Like, I don't know if you want to use that term. |
| EWP | Elicit, writing practices | Deals with partners asking for more information, asking for a clarification, or seeking input about specific textual features such as organization, grammar, mechanics, and diction. | Writer seeks clarification after responder says that the word "this" should not be used repeatedly. Writer says to responder: "Why not?!" |

| EWC | Elicit, writing content | Deals with partners asking for more information or asking for a clarification about evidence in the text (i.e. the facts themselves, not the way they are presented or the worded). Responders might ask writers about a specific detail mentioned in the text, such as asking about the date of an event for a history paper. | Responder seeks clarification about the writer's interpretation of the story he was analyzing: "Secrets? She secretly wanted to be like her sister?" |
|---|---|---|---|
| EWX | Elicit, writing context | Deals with partners asking for more information, asking for a clarification, or seeking input about the constraints that shape a writer's task, such as the paper assignment, writing genre, teacher expectations, and grading criteria. | Responder asks writer about her assignment: "It's like an essay?" |
| R | Reading text | Writers and/or responders might read part of the text aloud to test how a section sounds, whether the section is from the writer's original draft or represents | Writer reads corrected version aloud: "So it's '*even if the story is fiction.*'" |

| | | a proposed revision. | |
|---|---|---|---|
| BB | Bonding Behavior | Utterances that draw partners closer together, often stemming from a common experience; such utterances are also manifested as laughter, praise, inside jokes or stories about past experiences, self-deprecating comments, or commiseration about the academic experience. | Responder says to writer: "I'm not an English major . . ." Writer replies: "You know more than me." |
| H | Phatic | Utterances that are meant to maintain social connections and serve as a conversational placeholder. | "Yeah, okay." or "Oh." |

Appendix E

| Session | Participants | Date of Session | Time of Session | Location | Length (in minutes) | Length of paper (# of double-spaced pages) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Kara (writer) Brooke (responder) | Sept. 26 | 8:30 p.m. | responder's room | 14 | 4 |
| 2 | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** |
| 3 | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** | *** |
| 4 | Kara (writer) Veronica (responder) | Nov. 16 | 7:04 p.m. | responder's room | 16 | 4.5 |
| 5 | Louis (writer) Rocco (responder) Sara (guest) | Feb. 23 | 4:40 p.m. | writer's room | 25 | 3 |
| 6 | Autumn (writer) Gwen (responder) | Feb. 24 | 3:32 p.m. | writer's room | 21 | 3.5 |
| 7 | Tyrone (writer) Amy Jo (responder) | April 6 | 6:33 p.m. | responder's room | 25 | 6 |
| 8 | Louis (writer) Sara (responder) Rocco (guest) | April 7 | 8:08 p.m. | writer's room | 11 | 5.5 |
| 9 | Tamara (writer) Shannon (responder) Amy Jo (guest) | April 17 | 8:23 p.m. | writer's room | 19 | 4.5 |
| 10 | Autumn (writer) James (responder) | April 24 | 9:15 p.m. | first-floor lounge | 27 | 2.5 |

*** For an explanation of why Sessions 2 and 3 were excluded from the data, see p. 63 and p. 77, respectively.