

Peer Response: Helpful Pedagogy or Hellish Event

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MARNIE, A TALL, GRACEFUL Dominican woman, was a junior in my required WAC class at a large Northeast university. She had nervously approached me the first week of class saying she “couldn’t write,” but needed this course to graduate. The anxiety monster glinted in her eyes as they filled with memory’s sting and the frustration of previous writing experiences. I reached into my ready grab bag of sincere but well-worn clichés: “We would run the class as a workshop,” “A multiple draft approach would be used for all high stakes pieces,” “All effective writing was about revision,” and “I would be the guide by her side, not her red-penned critic.” This formula seemed to work as she promised to return the next week, comfortably assured, marginally inspired, and, I believed, ready to write. She seemed to relax into the hope of a positive experience, and, for that week and the next, she kept our class chuckling and thinking with her witty remarks and homespun stories about language and writing.

Three weeks later, Marnie’s smile, which lit up our drab concrete classroom in the February grayness of that New England winter, was oddly missing as I caught a quick glimpse of her outside my classroom. A bit obsessive about time from the haunting feeling that there was never enough, I prepared to begin class, wondering what was up with Marnie and why she hesitated out in the hall. The usual before-class visitors with their excuses about missing homework and chat about reading assignments clustered around me as I organized notes and wrote group assignments on the board for the evening’s first round of peer response. Time to begin arrived ... yet still she lingered ... no hello, no smile, no movement.

I began giving directions regarding how response groups would be run. “People were in charge of what they wanted others to review. Words like ‘That’s great’ and ‘That’s awful’ were useless phrases without more helpful feedback about what specifically was working or what, in the responder’s opinion, might need more work. We were a team, thinking together as readers and writers to help one another communicate most effectively with the writing in our discipline.” It was a well-rehearsed speech, given to many writing classes of various ages.

As peer response groups began to form, Marnie beckoned me into the hallway. No, she would not come in, but did not want me to think she was skipping class. She also wanted me to know she had the night’s assignment but would absolutely not, under any circumstances, give it to classmates to discuss and review. “What about all we had talked about? Team, remember? Coaches, not critics? We were all there to help?” What had gone wrong? If we had been standing at the top of the Empire State Building and I asked her to jump, she could not have been more resolute in her determination to avoid my requests. Her frightened face glistened and her hand was shaking as she reached out to mine in the warmth of a gesture that both touched and frustrated me. “I don’t want to disappoint you. But I can’t let those people see what I have written. You can. Not them.”

Culturally entrenched in my own views, I was absolutely convinced that talking Marnie into participation was valuable and constructive. Not until some time later would I come to recognize that there are some components of peer response I had not understood. At the time, getting Marnie to participate seemed akin to encouraging my own children to take that first unsteady ride on a two-wheeler. It was scary, but somehow a movement forward into something exciting ... wasn’t it? Well-meaning but culturally illiterate in many ways, I mistook Marnie’s refusal to enter into peer response as simple performance anxiety.

This Story’s Purpose

Marnie’s story suggests far more was happening in this process-writing classroom than I realized. Her actions sparked my realization that one’s perception of peer response and participation in it are complex and tremendously socially and culturally layered. It is possible that, despite the best of intentions, a practice designed to be supportive and cooperative can be threatening, even terrifying and humiliating. How could I have missed that?

Many of today’s writing instructors have never been aware of or have abandoned the earlier view of peer response as a radical pedagogy, designed to

allow more students to enter the discourse communities of universities (Bruffee, 1984). The voices of the Eighties that had questioned aspects of power relations in Peer Response (Myers, 1986; Trimbur, 1989), addressing issues of cultural difference and the silencing of some voices, seemed hardly audible above the joyous cacophony of Process Writing enthusiasts like Elbow, Murray, and Atwell. Many educators (like me) had come to see peer response as simply another form of classroom collaboration, an important step in the writing process that helped move instructors across the curriculum away from the mechanistic correct and return policies that preceded it. Rather than reading papers as a finished piece of literature, we could think of the writing as ‘in process.’ It seemed such an important pedagogical advancement, helpful to students, teachers, and multidiscipline educators.

However, those murmurs of concern from the eighties are growing louder. In the 21st century, when teachers are expected to better understand the multicultural dimensions of their classrooms, it becomes imperative to recognize the cultural conflicts that can and do exist within them (Delpit, 1995). Educators are challenged to take a more sociocultural view of writers and identity (Ivanic, 1997; Gee, 1999), thus bringing together who we are, how we write, and how we respond to writing. The discourse community of the classroom is a culture with its own historical norms and conventions (Ivanic 1997), however little discussion takes place in those same classrooms as to how participants are shaped by elements such as privilege, ethnicity, dis/ability, gender, or a myriad of other identity-defining factors.

In this paper, I want to add to the discussion that problematizes the relationship writers may have with one another and with themselves as they enter into and interact in peer response groups. I do not feign “the answers,” but my practice, research, and collaborations oblige me to share the questions.

An Unexpected Lesson

I was in the midst of a doctoral dissertation on writer identity when an invitation to work in cross-country collaboration of teachers and professors was extended to me. Neck deep in studies and teaching full-time, I conceived of the collaboration as a chance to refocus on core research issues, a place to share concerns, question, explore, and revisit aspects of my investigation through the fresh eyes of far-flung colleagues. Perhaps their unique “insider but outsider” perspectives would further help me confront issues of writing with, if not new eyes, at least a wider focus.

With stories like Marnie's never far from my thoughts, I continued my study and analysis of writer identity and came to question the idea of a unified self, unique and individual. Not long into my work, I had adopted poststructural theory's concept of multiple and conflicting identities (Foucault, 1984; Sarup, 1989; Berlin, 1992). Compared to the humanist idea of a self that is unified, coherent, and autonomous, this theory made more sense given the contradictory behaviors I was witnessing in writing classes. In fact, a key finding of my dissertation would be that students construct their writer identities in not only multiple ways, but also in ways that conflict or bump up against each other. Surprisingly, even students who claimed to dislike and fear writing, like Marnie, felt very strongly about their efforts and took great joy in writing when circumstances required less formal academic discourse. When the student writers of my research took up discourses that were familiar and comfortable to them, they reported feeling positive and secure in their writing, even when that writing was complex and technical. After all, it was not writing they feared, but feeling unable to live up to the varied expectations of "good writing" required in certain places in the academy. Many of them felt the voices they were required to take up sounded contrived, put on, or foreign to their home discourses. To be an "outsider" in the academy often means being in conflict with practices that insiders feel are quite natural, even commonsensical, practices like peer response. While peer response was not the focus of my dissertation research, it certainly became tangentially important.

One case study in my dissertation involved a student I call Len. He was a college senior from Haiti, tri-lingual, who had put off this required writing course until his last semester because he feared it so much. Len felt that peer response was the worst experience with writing he had had in his schooling. In the following excerpts from his portfolio, he shares some powerful insights regarding response groups.

"The first evaluation is always full with numerous remarks on how to improve the writing. I hate watching someone evaluate my writing because of the remarks and comments ... It makes me feel very low, meaning unable to write anything well ... I am an individual that has strong feelings for my writing ... I am a writer that likes to express my childhood stories to those that can relate to my childhood stories. I have a difficult and different life from many American kids ...

I hate in-class group work that includes students reading other students papers... The reader might tell me that my paper needs specific

corrections but at the same time the reader say in his or her mind that my writing is weak, poor. I only ask people that know me first and my writing to read my writing because they have a better understanding of my writing. ... I do not feel uncomfortable around them when they are helping me ... But I do feel uncomfortable around those that I don't know when they are reading my writings.”

Len's words speak to issues of identity. It is not writing he dislikes. It is not even the idea of peer response. What he dislikes is being judged for his non-conformity to the writing practices of academia, especially by folks who do not know him or understand his life. Len takes an outsider's view of his writing experience in the university. He is familiar with the not-so-subtle institutionalized racism that can be a part of everyday life. When people look at him and his writing, they are not amazed that he speaks three languages nor do they marvel that he has managed to get to where he is when poverty and family circumstances have created cruel and unyielding roadblocks. Instead, he is simply judged a poor writer, someone who struggles with standard grammar and the subtleties of formal academic writing.

According to poststructuralist theory (Britzman, 1990), the *discourse* of experiences rather than the experience itself is at the center of identity. It is not just our past experiences that allow us to retell or invent our identities, or even an intuitive sense of who we are, but our access to particular discourses that allows us to create the experience. This, in turn, is limited by our histories, beliefs, and socially constructed conceptions of “truth,” knowledge, and power. Discourses, according to Foucault (in Weedon 1997) are ways of creating knowledge, thinking and producing meaning. Gee (1999) theorizes that as teachers we are not teachers of literacy or language, but of social languages within discourses. The discourses with tremendous power in American society often have strong institutional backing, as does academic discourse. From the time they entered school, Len and Marnie probably bumped up against this powerful discourse and were judged lacking. Now, it was not just their teachers doing the painful and humiliating judging. Their peers, schooled in the discourse of “good and correct writing,” would now add to the chastising chorus.

Like Marnie, Len knew that outsiders in the academy face a special judgment by peers and professors. Color, class, and dialect accentuate their difference, making others wonder if they are afforded “special” treatment, no matter how talented they are or how hard they work. While his personal friends might be trusted to assist him

with the writing process, his more typical college classmates eye him suspiciously when they first see his drafts written in a dialect so different from their own. Their judgment of “broken” English (for isn’t that the way we refer to the language of non-native speakers?) created the same fear that I had witnessed in Marnie. Len knew his peers’ questions. Why was he here? What was “wrong” with him? Why couldn’t he write?

When one’s language is substantially different from what is familiar to peer responders or if writers perceive themselves to be socially or culturally distanced from their responding peers, the process can be nightmarish. Working with our AVD group made me realize how dreadful this “helpful step in the writing process” might be for students when Amy read her paper.

Another Unexpected Lesson

During a response group meeting for teacher-researchers, the leaders decided it would be helpful to model a process of peer response for review of our research articles. Because I had to go back to New York a day earlier than the others, our facilitator asked if he could use my draft for modeling with our group of about 18. Because I both preach use of peer response techniques for students and use it regularly with teacher-candidates in my classroom, I said sure. However, my own draft had not moved to data analysis and we realized it would not be particularly useful to this group, many of whom had advanced to final draft stage. So I offered up a young, talented colleague, Amy, whose story writing ability was legendary not only in our group, but with her colleagues. The youngest of our team, this teacher had amazed us with her powerful narratives, creative teaching, and insightful observations. Despite incredible visits to each other’s classrooms and field trips to schools that were worlds apart from our own, nothing proved more stirring than listening to the stories Amy wrote and told about growing up poor. Her talents were the envy of our group, so I figured if anyone had a draft that could help others, it would be she.

While Amy would not have volunteered to act as “guinea pig,” as a dutiful team member and practicing English teacher, she relinquished her draft when our facilitator made the request. He set us up around the table, handed out copies of her paper, and told us to prepare three responses. What stood out in a positive way? What intrigued you but could use clarification? What suggestions would you make? These general types of responses felt familiar and comfortable, a low-risk way to discuss writing and prepare for eventual publication.

As participant and observer, I thought the process went very well. As might be expected from a gathering with more than its share of writing instructors, our group was not shy about offering opinions or ideas. When the session ended, though, and the facilitator asked Amy about her reaction to the process, she glanced down at the table and responded “Painful.” I could feel my chest tighten as the words of Marnie and Len thundered in my ears. Amy did not jokingly say, “Painful.” Her expression and body language let us know that the hurt was real. She was not thinking, “Boy, did I get lots of ideas to incorporate or ignore.” She was not saying, “Thanks, everyone. That feedback will really make a difference in my drafting process.” Instead, she was upset that she had not had more time to work on her draft before becoming what must have seemed to her a public spectacle. She had faced “response” from older, experienced teachers and felt somehow humiliated by the process . . . and *her* paper was wonderful. Oh my gosh . . . if this was happening to Amy, certainly an accomplished writer and teacher, what must all the Marnies and Lens in our classes be going through?

That partnership provided a re-thinking space, unique for sure, and somehow more powerful, more jarring, because I was no longer in my Massachusetts birthplace or even my familiar Northeast corridor. Amy’s accounts of partying Cherokee relatives and a Southern trailer-life childhood juxtaposed to her spectacular vision and practice in the teaching of writing had challenged my thinking in subtle ways before. Now, set along side the pain of her reaction to our peer response session, Amy’s reaction disrupted and challenged my local knowledge in a way that Marnie’s and Len’s stories alone could not do. My colleague’s reaction helped crystallize and give meaning to my students’ voices. Like the friends outside the classroom who Len trusted to review his work, I was Amy’s friend, now able to better investigate her internal dialogue because I was outside of my role of teacher. I could see how the collaboration that most of us around the table assumed was useful and productive was something else for Amy, just as it had been something else for Marnie and Len.

Ironically, the actions of a doctoral student in my home cohort group also came to mind through Amy that day. The only African-American in the cluster, this woman did not want to work with other doctoral students in peer response groups despite pressure from advisors to do so. At the time, I thought of her discomfort as overly sensitive, perhaps even naive about writing and process elements. Now, I felt ashamed of those thoughts and realized it was not her over-sensitivity, but my insensitivity and lack of understanding of the sociocultural factors at work in our lives. Why had I not thought of her until I heard the word “painful” from my young collaborator?

I began by saying I have more questions than answers, and I do. As we move to more multicultural understandings in our classrooms and cultural readings become a staple of composition classes, are we failing to recognize the part that conflict plays in all power relations, including collaborative groups? Our histories shape aspects of our identity and introduce the discourses we use to make sense of our experiences. School and collaboration may evoke widely differing memories, especially given the less-than-proud history of “correct and return” associated with academic writing in educational institutions. Response groups involve interactions that can be layered and complicated. For years I have had students relate stories of teacher responses to writing that were unhelpful or humiliating, making me wonder if an additional question regarding peer response groups we should be contemplating is, “What can happen in response groups that hinders or thwarts our goals in the writing process?”

As promised in my statement of purpose, I have generated diverse but related questions as I reflect on the peer response process. How often do we unwittingly silence difference as we move to maintain an established practice? Is there a contradictory tension between valuing difference and working toward the norms of academic writing? Are we simply setting students up to refine their prose to the academy’s satisfaction, or do we have a part in assisting students’ understanding and appreciation of the value and power of their voices? If writing is a way to develop the confidence and habit of mind needed to participate more fully in the world, how can we safely and comfortably make response groups a part of that process? While Marnie and Len are bilingual and bicultural, what about students with learning disabilities, especially those disabilities that affect language? What about those many students whose home dialects do not shift easily to academic discourse? Is it possible that the educational practice of peer response that I have adopted for its liberatory possibilities could be replicating some oppressive aspects of society? What can we do explicitly in our classrooms to demonstrate we understand and value difference at the same time we are charged with teaching writing that “works” within the institutions in which we function?

Fecho, Graham and Ross (2003) describe an authored space of uncertainty in our lives that lies between and among figured worlds as a “wobble.” I have come to wonder if somewhere between my practice and strongly held beliefs, and the enacted world of classroom peer response there also exists a wobble. I am certainly experiencing the unsettling state of vertigo they defined.

There is so much about peer response we need to know if we want to use it successfully in our classes, including power dynamics, culture, writing history, and

academic norms. While I thought I understood these, Amy's story and our group experience have sent me back to the drawing board. In a few weeks, when my graduate students bring their drafts to class, I will once again try to make peer response a productive experience for everyone. I will remember Marnie's face, Len's words, and Amy's reaction and know that we, too, are in process . . . and we need one another in so many different ways to keep moving the discussion and examining the issues. Without collaboration, without the wobbles, complex questions may be hushed by calm of routine—and remarkable stories and significant voices quashed.

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