

Peer Response Groups

The purpose of this session is to explore some possibilities of working with revising and editing groups by experiencing some activities.

Whenever you want students to work in groups, you need to begin with some introductory activities which help students get started working together effectively. To help us do this today, let's try working on this puzzle in pairs first.

[Editor's Note: Distribute copies of the handout entitled "Mental Flexibility Puzzle," a word puzzle in which offers unusual diagrams that represent common phrases. Pair off participants or let them choose a partner. After they work for awhile, have pairs join to form foursomes to finish as much as they can. If time permits, go over the puzzle and let people give clues to correct answers so that everyone has all the answers by the end of the work time.]

For the rest of this session let's operate under some assumptions. Let's assume the following about the groups you have set up in your room:

- A. Heterogeneous groups of mixed skills, abilities, and behaviors
- B. 3-5 students
- C. Have been taught how to work together and why they should
- D. Have worked together enough to trust each other and are willing to share and help each other
- E. Students know your rules and expectations
- F. Group members are seated together physically
- G. In general, groups are working well

What we are going to focus on today are called response groups, groups that work together to help each other revise and edit.

If we want students to respond effectively and really help each other compose, we have to teach them how to do so. One approach that seems to help is to distinguish between revising and editing and to have students focus on these separately at least at first.

Drafting

To make this workshop real, we need to do some writing so we will have something to revise and edit. But first we need to do some prewriting. For this activity you need to choose a partner, but only one person. And you need paper and a pencil.

Directions:

* I will give one partner a simple sketch. Your task is to give the directions for drawing this sketch which is being drawn.

- * The other person is to draw based on the directions. The drawer may not ask any questions.
- * The person giving directions may not look at the sketch.
- * When done, compare.
- * Exchange roles and I will give you a new sketch.

In class you would want students to describe what happened and why. They could make up some rules for writing good directions. You could then have them make a list of directions for getting from the classroom to someplace in the building. They would share these. You might even have students test them to see if they work. All of this could be prewriting for a major task. One assignment would be to pretend that they are going to give a party and everyone in class is invited. But since only a few people know where they live, they have to include the directions to their home. Since all the people will be coming from school because it's an after-school party, they are to use the school as a starting point. Students can usually begin in class, but most need to do some research or get help from parents. It is a good idea to have maps around and to give them a day or two to collect the details they need.

For our purposes here today, you are to write the directions for getting from your school to some specific location. Your home is okay or you can choose another spot. However, it has to be a place which requires the making of at least 5 turns. Also, please write in prose form; do not make a list.

Revising

One of the best points about this assignment is that it has an interesting possibility for revision. When students think their rough drafts are sufficient, they can be put into groups of 3 or 4. One person reads his/her directions; the listeners draw maps. Then they compare results and determine where the directions become unclear. Let's see how well you did. Rejoin your foursome. One person reads and others draw. Then share. Continue until everyone has read. You will want to note that this activity forces everyone to focus on the content. You can't correct mechanics to any extent because you don't see the other papers. By drawing maps the student writer can quickly see where the directions are clear and where they go awry. If geographic directions and map drawing are beyond your students, then have them write directions for doing something such as tying a shoe, peeling an orange, or popping popcorn and then have other people act out or actually perform the action.

For our purposes, we are going to take this idea one step further. Your task now is to explain to the rest of us how to teach a composition activity or assignment that has really worked well for you in the past. However, your time is limited so choose something you can tell about in one or two paragraphs. To help you think of your best idea, you might want to try some clustering. As soon as you have an idea, you can begin writing your explanation. Use prose to tell us how to teach this lesson or simple unit.

One of the most effective ways to teach students how to revise and edit in small groups is to use a 3 stage sequence:

1. You model for the class what is supposed to take place.
2. Then have one group demonstrate while the others watch. Discuss what happened and how to make the comments more helpful.
3. Then have each small group practice.

When you want to help students focus on revision and content, have them share orally. Do not let them trade papers. To model revising, you could ask students to listen very closely to a sample, such as the one below, and then ask some of the same kinds of questions that you want them to ask.

Sample: Leave the school and go right. Keep going around the curve. You will pass a large brick house with the name EAKIN in front. Keep going. Be sure to stop when you get to Mt Comfort Road. After two more miles, turn. My house is the last one.

The next stage is to have a group demonstrate revising. To do this, you might want to try a fishbowl approach. Select one group to demonstrate while the rest of the class observes. Remind the demonstration group to concentrate on the content. Take turns reading and giving responses. Give them the instructions that the writer may jot notes while others respond, but that's all. They are not to defend, but they are to listen carefully when others respond. They must also listen well when others read. When the group is done, have the observers point out what helped the group work well and what hindered them. Also, have them repeat the kinds of comments that were most helpful.

The next step is to have students practice revising in their own small groups. As they do this, you must circulate, listen, prod, and praise. Keep in mind that you are trying to teach them how to revise. At this point the process is more important than the result. For our purposes today, let's try a simple response strategy which is called PQP. To do this, one person reads. Each listener then does three things. First the listener offers praise about some aspect of the content. Then the listener asks a question about some part of the paper or some factor related to the composing process that went on. Finally, the listener offers one suggestion for polishing the content - praise, question, polishing suggestion. When finished with one reader's paper, another person reads and so on until everyone has had a chance to read.

Keep in mind that revising groups usually help students find problems, but they may be much less beneficial in helping people fix what's off track. Listen to the groups. Look for consistent problems. Teach a mini-lesson on how to fix problem spots. This is an excellent time to demonstrate how you revise. Think aloud while you revise on the overhead.

Demonstrate reading aloud repeatedly to make sure revisions don't create other muddles and errors. This is also a good time to teach them some common revising strategies such as drawing arrows and numbering sentences. Papers which are being revised ought to be messy and students need to know that.

There are lots of variations on this general structure. Here are some other possibilities:

Use other questions that make more sense to your students or fit the material they are currently writing.

- A. Gradually introduce questions through teacher modeling followed by group application.
- B. Have students practice revising in pairs before they try in larger groups.

- C. Have students formulate some questions about their work that they want the group to answer.
- D. Encourage students to focus on only one aspect of the paper, such as organization or an effective opening.
- E. Have students complete a yes-no response sheet about the papers, especially if you noted specific problems in rough drafts.
- F. Before students revise, have them create a criteria sheet as a class. Then groups can use this to guide their revising work.
- G. Assign roles to group members appropriate to revision (i.e., one to check organization, another to check coherence, another to check sufficiency of support or detail, etc.)
- H. Have students create semantic maps while they listen. It would also be possible for a writer to give the group a partial graphic organizer and have them fill in the details as they listen.

Once the group has met for revising, then the writers need to rework the papers. At this point you as the teacher need to emphasize that writers own their own papers and are responsible for deciding whether to accept or reject the advice they have received. This is important for two reasons. First, if students feel that they must act on all the advice they receive then they may feel that the paper is no longer theirs. When this happens, motivation declines. Second, each writer must be ultimately responsible for his or her own work.

This is especially important if the group or a group member gives the writer some poor advice which the writer accepts and uses. It is not uncommon to encounter a situation in which you mark a paper down for some reason and the writer says this is unfair because he/she was following the advice of a group member. Writers need to know that this is not an excuse they can use. They must understand that using or disregarding advice is their decision.

Let's take just a few minutes and give you a chance to make any changes in your papers that you wish to make. You are welcome to renumber sentences if that will help or draw arrows or use asterisks for inserts.

[Editor's Note: In the workshop, allow about 5-10 minutes for revising.]

Editing

When writers have revised sufficiently and have produced a readable copy of the paper, they are ready to edit. This is the time for physically sharing papers and passing them around. To teach students how to edit, you could use the same basic structure of teacher modeling followed by group demonstration and discussion before having groups practice on their own. The major difference is that this time the work must be shared visually although it can also be shared orally. For the teacher modeling, you could use an overhead transparency of a paper or Xerox copies for everyone. The fishbowl technique usually works better if the observers have copies of the papers and if the group examines the papers one at a time.

Editing may be more effective if the editors have to do something to the papers. For example, students may be asked to draw heavy black slash marks after each sentence to check for complete sentences between. They may trace capital letters with red felt tip pens to check for unnecessary capitals. They can use highlighter pens to mark each punctuation mark. Long stretches with no highlighting often signals missing punctuation. It would also be possible to

have writers mark their own papers in these ways before sharing with their editing groups. To see how this works, let's try some simple strategies on your papers even though they have not been extensively revised and recopied. For now just draw in slash marks at the ends of sentences and circle each punctuation mark. If possible, use a different writing implement to do this so that the markings stand out clearly.

Today we are going to practice editing by using a checklist.

[Editor's Note: Several such check lists are available in the literature.]

While students edit, you must be an active observer. Listen for common misconceptions and look for patterns of error. Use this as the basis for mini-lessons for the whole class or small groups. During editing sessions, be sure that students have access to reference materials. Demonstrate how and when to use them, encourage their use, and expect students to use them.

Editing, of course, is a very complex activity. There is so much to look for. You might want to consider focusing on only one item at first and build up to more. You can even assign different responsibilities to each group member. Rotate the roles periodically. Checklists are especially good for editing. This could be a pre-prepared list or a list posted in the room and added to as the year progresses or a list in each student's folder. You could even have a continuous checklist for the whole year that shows a record of each edited piece.

Additional Suggestions

During both revising and editing, the issue of loss of ownership can be a problem. This is particularly true if you or students mark on the papers. Here are some suggested options for dealing with this problem:

- * Let the students decide whether or not you and/or their group members may mark on the papers.
- * Edit only a copy which everyone knows is not a final copy, such as
- * One written on every other line
- * One where each sentence begins on a new line
- * One written in pencil when all finals are written in ink
- * Computer printouts if the writer knows that the original is saved on disk as is - one on which the words "rough draft" have been written in ink at the top
- * Use post-it notes to mark problem spots
- * Mark only in the left margin, using a check mark to indicate that the line
- * Contains a problem.
- * Use pencil for marking so the author can readily erase marks

As part of revising and editing, have students experiment with a variety of revising and editing strategies. When they come to you with questions, ask them what strategies they have already tried and what were the results. Keep in mind that by helping others, students will learn more about their own writing processes. However, the goal is independence. We do not want students to become totally dependent upon the group. Nevertheless, the group's feedback is useful. Just simply learning to speak the language of composing is valuable.

How do you motivate students to revise and edit? When students are excited about what they are writing, confident about themselves as writers, and intent upon producing their best work because it will be seen by real readers, they are much

more likely to revise and edit willingly. As long as they see the task as nothing more than just another school assignment, they are likely to resist. Not every paper is worth revising and not every revised paper is worth editing. When possible, give students some control over these activities. Teach students how to revise and edit and reward them for engaging in these activities even when the results aren't much better. Keep in mind that any paper, no matter how poorly done, may be little more than a shadow of the effort and learning that actually occurred during the production.

Recommended Further Reading:

Spear, K. (1988). *Sharing writing: Peer response groups in English classes*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook - Heinemann.

Spear, K. (1993). *Peer response groups in action*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann - Boynton/Cook.