Different Strokes: Composing in a Writing Group

by

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Writing groups may well be the most memorable experience of Writing Project Summer Institutes. For example, the South Coast Writing Project (SCWriP) at University of California, Santa Barbara, has contemplated in its 15 years of existence changing almost everything except dropping writing groups, reports director Sheridan Blau. Writing groups give project fellows the gift of receiving help with their own writing. As accomplished teachers, fellows have often given help to students with their writing, but many have not had such help with their own writing. The experience has been so pedagogically powerful that many fellows return to their classrooms in the fall and set up writing groups in their own classrooms. The experience has been so personally powerful that some SCWriP writing groups that form at the Summer Institute have continued meeting throughout the years: writing, reacting, and editing each other's work, even collaborating on published pieces (Cotich, Dixon, Nelson, Shapiro, & Yeager, 1994).

My experience with a writing group was equally as powerful for me as a writer and teacher. At a 1993 SCWriP Summer Institute, I participated in a writing group, eventually producing a poem about the death of my sister. My sister had died three years earlier from the agonizing effects of alcoholism. This Summer Institute was the first time that I had attempted to compose my feelings about that tragic event. Throughout the course of writing the poem, I was struck not only by the sensitive and supportive help I received from my group members, but I was struck also by the kind of help I received. At different stages of the writing process, I got different kinds of help, just the help I seemed to need at that particular time. This essay attempts to reconstruct that process, describing the evolution of a poem and a writing groups' invaluable assistance in that history.

The Writing Group and the Poem

My writing group consisted of four members: two elementary school teachers (Harriet Wingard and Irene Pattenaude) and two college teachers (Bettina Calouri and myself). Through the course of the five-week Summer Institute, we were all working on individual pieces which would be published in SCWriP's Summer Anthology 1993. The final anthologized form of my piece became:

Masked

Bottles of blood and saline are her only liquor now.
Bloated, jaundiced, and bleeding,
She lies tethered in her hospital bed.
Blood drips into punctured veins and
Ebb's from every pore.
My sister has drunk herself to death
And these last few drinks of salt and blood
Won't save her now.

The room is white and pulsing—
White walls, white coats, white sheets.
The respirator lifts and falls,
Monitors intone, a vacuum
Hisses by the bed.

It is the mask that startles most.
Amid the white of walls and sheets and coats,
There is the padded black of a catcher's mask
That frames her bleeding face,
Holding in place the futile tube to staunch
The bleeding in her throat.

I touch her hand and call her name.
Almost at once she rouses,
Rising toward my voice, struggling
To free herself of wires, tubes, and mask.
I try to comfort her,  
To calm her back onto the bed, 
To speak the words that make it right. 
But it's too late for words.

Now, there's only touch and hush 
But I pull back my hand, 
Afraid of what I'll feel.

At the end of the Summer Institute, our writing group was interviewed on videotape, talking about how the group had helped bring this poem into its final form. The following discussion of that process is based upon the transcript of the videotape, supplemented with examples from my seven different drafts of the poem.

So what kind of help did the group give me? At the prewriting stage, the group provided help primarily in the form of encouragement and validation of my “problems” and my approach to the problems. At the writing stage, the group was concerned with forming, shaping, and suggesting changes. Finally, at the rewriting and editing stages, the group was primarily concerned with providing reactions, rather than suggestions.

**Prewriting Stage**

The prewriting stage of this poem took the form of several journal entries. The journal entry began as a reaction to a SCWriP presentation by co-director Jack Phraenener on description. He had asked us to recall a vivid scene from our lives, describe it, and then try to penetrate its meaning: the “so what” of the experience, he had called it. I chose to describe my sister lying in a hospital bed, dying from alcoholism.

As I described the scene in the journal, several problems began to emerge. The first was a genre problem. What kind of text was this going to be? The journal was in prose and though the scene seemed amenable to poetry, at this stage I wrote only in prose. The second problem was one of topic. Was this piece going to be about her dying, my reaction to her dying, or something else:

She tries to get up off the bed. She is like a blinded, staked bear, trying to groove toward the sound of my voice. I'm afraid she'll dislodge some of the tubes inserted in her... Perhaps the greater fear is that she will try to speak. What would she say, what could I say back? What can any words say in this situation. I'm afraid I'll not know what to do and say. (Journal, 6/24/93).

The third problem, which turned out to be the stumbling block, was the “so what.” “The key perhaps is to stick with the fear — that fear of her, that fear in the moment of contact... repulsion, grief, and fear, those are the emotions that have to be ‘explained’” (Journal, 6/25/93). What did this all mean? What was the point?

It was that “so what” that the group first helped me tackle. As Harriet said of the group, “We wanted to acknowledge this is something that did mean something to you and there had to be a ‘so what’ in there somewhere.” Bettina, seconded that notion: “I remember your wondering whether repulsion, grief, and fear was a ‘so what’ and we all said, ‘Sounds like it to us, right?’” Later, Harriet said, “I think we’ve been good... in acknowledging the feeling of what somebody has written, rather than jumping in and looking at ways to change it or revise it.”

Though validation was the group’s major help at this stage, there was some help in shaping and forming as well. Harriet notes that, “We asked you questions that might help you shape where you wanted to go with it.” The result was my focusing on the “repulsion, grief, and fear.” That was the “so what” or the meaning. As I affirmed on the videotape, “You encouraged me to focus on that stuff,” a focus that Irene later found particularly compelling. “You seemed to capture strong images that brought about each one of those things: repulsion, fear, and grief,” she said.

**Writing Stage**

I’ve characterized the writing stage as drafts 1, 2, and 3. At this stage, the group was most concerned with form, reader reactions, and suggested changes. There was some validation, particularly with draft 1 which was only the first stanza of the poem. After hearing me read that first stanza, the group encouraged me to continue. But primarily at this stage, the group got down to the nuts and bolts of revision.

Most of the group’s work at this stage was concerned with draft 3, which was a full draft of the poem. The appearance of the piece was prose-like, however. Lines did not begin with capital letters, stanzas did not appear with definite breaks, and sentences ran over lines with no apparent pattern. The group dealt with the problem of form. “This was an interesting transition piece because it didn’t really look like a poem, but it felt like it,” Harriet said. With draft 1 I had felt much the same way. I had a first stanza and I felt I could go on. But it needed
more. As Bettina noted, "In certain ways it felt like a poem but 'the silent hush of machines hovered in the air' (draft 3) felt like prose."

Beyond general concerns of form, the group also made suggestions for specific line changes. For example, a line in draft 3 read, "it holds in place the lenten tube, a futile attempt to staunch the bleeding in the throat." Harriet suggested telescoping that to "futile tube." In draft 3 the last lines of the poem read "afraid of what I'll find" and Harriet suggested changing "find" to "feel," picking up the double meaning of touch and emotion.

Just as important as suggestions, however, were reactions to the poem. For example, based on Bettina's reaction to the prosy clunk of the "silent hush of machines" above, I changed the line to "monitors intone". As Bettina noted, a big part of the group's work was in giving feedback, letting the writer know how the reader was reading and whether the writer intended that reaction. Irene noted the same kind of help in her own writing of a short story, where the group "was able to pick up on things where there were big gaps in your understanding as readers." Harriet summed up the group's approach by saying, "We had the luxury of having the writer here so we could say this is what I interpreted, is that what you meant?"

**Rewriting and Editing Stage**

This stage of the process focused on drafts 4 through 7. These drafts concentrated almost exclusively on form, arranging the lines on the page. Drafts 4 and 5 were working with a scanned 10-beat line, drafts 6 and 7 were working with a freer metric arrangement. Draft 6 was arranged flush left, draft 7 was arranged with each line centered, the eventual form of the poem. At this stage, the group provided help primarily in the form of reactions. Particularly helpful was a full reading by Irene. In her reading she stumbled in two places where sentences overran the line. She suggested changing the lines. Bettina, however, noted that the centered arrangement called attention to the last lines of each stanza, creating a kind of mini-poem, or refrain, within the poem. I ultimately decided that to make the changes Irene suggested would disturb that pattern, which I hadn't noticed, but now liked.

**The Writer's Perspective**

My decision to take or decline help was also a factor in the group's working on the poem. As a journalist and academic, I'm comfortable (at least experienced) in taking and requesting criticism on my writing. As such, I had a perspective on what I hoped to say. As Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (1995) have said, in writing we are always right and we are always wrong. We are right in that we know what we are trying to say, but wrong in that we don't know how others are interpreting it. In that sense, the writer's perspective is one half of the negotiated space between Elbow's "right and wrong."

At every stage of the process, I brought in particular problems with which I wanted help. For example, in the prewriting stage, I set the agenda by constantly bringing the group back to my concern about the "so what." Similarly, in the writing stage, I was committed to the form of a poem and sought help to strengthen that form. Finally, in the editing stage, I felt free not to take the advice that Irene offered, even though I had asked her to read the new line arrangements.

The importance of the writer's perspective was underscored by Irene in talking about her own writing. She noted that after the group's reaction to her short story, she "fiddled with that more trying to put more clarity in there and still not lose that sense I wanted to keep going with, but knowing where the confusion is." Cotich et. al. (1994) give the writer's perspective the same importance in talking about their writing group:

> Rules are not as important as simply asking the writer what she wants to receive in the way of comments. This depends largely on what stage the piece is in — from first draft to the preparation to publish. (12)

This writer's perspective is also important because it may indicate a salient difference between adult writing groups and student writing groups. This is certainly something worth considering as we seek as teachers to implement response groups in our classrooms. Freedman (1992) found that in one class of ninth graders there were occurrences of what she calls self-response during group reading of papers. These self-responses tended to be either further explanations or identifications of problems in clarity, content, or form. Yet, student peers responded to writers' questions in only 12.5% of the cases. It would seem that student writers are not insistent enough about the help they want or that student readers are not responsive to the problems raised. Neither was the case in my writing group.

A further difference between student groups and adult groups may focus on the intent of the help.
provided by the group. Working with fifth and tenth graders, Gere and Stevens (1985) found that the student comments were “intent on forming the text by informing it” while teacher comments attempted to form the text “by conforming it” (p. 103). The authors contend that these students treated the reading as an interpretive process — asking questions, filling in blanks — while the teachers engaged in a pedagogical process of “forming an ideal text” (p. 103). My group engaged in both processes. A certain amount of the help was in clarifying my meaning — reacting to the words and suggesting others in places. And a certain amount of the advice was formative. Because I was interested in writing a poem and not a narrative, some of the help was meant to conform the text to poetic conventions.

In the end, this case study raises as many questions as it answers. It confirms the basic premise of writing projects concerning composing processes. Different stages of the writing process, to the extent that they can be separated, involve different cognitive and affective processes. In the prewriting stage I needed encouragement more than suggestions; at the writing stage I needed suggestions and reactions more than encouragement. This writing group “worked” because it intuitively respected that process.

What remains to be seen in further investigation is to what extent the behavior of my group is typical or atypical of adult writing groups. Do other adult groups offer different advice for different stages? Or do they tend to take a unidimensional approach to peer response? Also worth further consideration is the importance of the writer’s perspective. I took an active part in identifying those parts of the process with which I needed help. Would the presence of a less “experienced” writer have changed the group processes? I tend to think perhaps not, that a generosity of spirit and a penchant for candor are just as necessary for success, but that is a subject for another essay.

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References


What's Going On with Response Groups?

Teachers who attend the Writing Project Summer Institutes are often amazed at the ways their peer response groups help them craft their writing. Testimonials from Summer Institute graduates and teachers who have maintained their writing groups beyond those five weeks abound in school faculty lounges as well as the pages of this journal. In this issue, for example, Fran Simone affirms the importance of her writing group in maintaining her motivation to write, and Robert Burroughs details the various kinds of help his group provided him through multiple drafts of his poem.

However, as Burroughs notes, when teachers try to use writing groups in their classrooms, they may face myriad problems translating their successful experience with colleagues into successful pedagogy with children or teens. We’d like to hear more about these struggles. What surprised you when you first started implementing peer response groups in your writing classrooms? What adaptations did you make in response to those surprises? Which adaptations worked for you in your particular context, which didn’t, and why?

Send us your response and we will consider it for publication in a future issue of The Quarterly.

—The Editors