

“I’ll Get by with a Little Help from my Friends”:
Peer Response Groups in the Composition Classroom

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of Mom and Dad,

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Because of you, I left home believing that I could do anything
that I was willing to work for.

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Abstract

Peer response groups in the composition classroom have become a standard part of the writing process for many teachers. However, some teachers maintain that the results of peer response groups are uneven at best, noting that students do not stay on task or that the quality of the student response itself is superficial. These concerns and others led researchers to a great deal of study on this topic during the 1980s and 1990s. There is, however, a gap in current research about the students' discourse in peer response groups, how that discourse affects students' revisions, and students' thought processes as they make their choices during the revision process. This qualitative study helps to fill this gap by taking a look inside eight writing groups of a College-in-the-Schools / AP composition class in northern Minnesota. Using an ethnographic and sociolinguistic analytical framework and the constant comparative method for the data analysis, this study examines the discourse of peer response groups and how that discourse relates to the revision of student writing. Findings of this study include observations of the intertextual nature of peer response, the collaborative generation of ideas in response sessions, and how the peer response process allows students to examine new perspectives. This study also includes implications for researchers and for teachers who are interested in using peer response groups in their classrooms.

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Chapter 1. Introduction to the Study

The Students

Five minutes have passed in third hour, and the students in Composition I are hard at work in teams of three and four. Most groups are scattered around the classroom, finding what privacy they can away from the other peer groups. One team of four is working just outside the door of the classroom in the hallway. Any comments about the excitement of last night's hockey game have faded in the first three minutes of class, and the only sounds now are comments about the papers that the students are sharing with each other.

It is a day for feedback on the cause and effect papers that the students are currently working on. Each student has had the opportunity to take their peers' papers home, read them, and generate some ideas for response, based on a project rubric that guides the students' writing. Now they have time to share those ideas.

In one group of two girls and one boy, the discussion has already turned to some key content ideas within the essay:

Kristen: I love your motivator. The whole thing of your grandmother and you playing with the tea set pulled me in. What I am not sure about is where you are taking us with your thesis idea. Is this supposed to be about the relationship between you and your grandmother at the time, or is it about how the relationship back then has affected you now?

Joe: Yeah, I had the same question. You seem to suggest that it is about

the effect on you now, but I am not sure that you get us there in your body paragraphs.

Rachel: What do you mean?

Joe: I mean I don't see enough direct ties from the personal experiences between you and your grandma that you share and your thesis, that she has had a profound effect on who you have become. I don't see how one caused the other. Is there a way that you can connect them more clearly?

Kristen: Yeah, like could you write on page 3, at the start of the second paragraph, something like, "It was not just Grandma's constant kindness to me alone that affected me; she treated others in the same way"? Because that is really what you are talking about in that next paragraph. The direct link between those paragraphs would help us see your point.

Rachel: Oh, I see. Yeah, that would work.

Kristen and Joe are doing more here than simply sharing their own opinions about Rachel's essay. Their discussion is intertextual, and the idea generation that is happening here is both collaborative and generative.

Although the specific topic of conversation changes from group to group, the focus of the student discussion is on the content of the writing pieces. Students know that they will have time in later group sessions to focus on mechanics. They have been

working in these groups for the better part of one semester; they know how it works, and they willingly engage themselves in the process.

This classroom conversation paints a picture that educational philosopher John Dewey would certainly have supported. Dewey (1897) believed in the idea that knowledge building occurs in a community of learners:

The only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling, and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Through the responses which others make to his own activities he comes to know what these mean in social terms. The value which they have is reflected back into them.

-John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed*, 1897

One of the central purposes of education, Dewey believed, was to nurture students to become socially responsible citizens who are able to work collaboratively to solve problems within society. When people work with others, Dewey maintained, they can enrich their own understandings because they are able to draw on their peers' knowledge as well as their own (Guterk, 2004; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). Klockow (2008) argues for social interaction through classroom dialogue as a means of establishing a democratic classroom community for students. Brice (2002) points to dialogue as not only a starting point for creating a democratic classroom, but also a necessary component in the perpetuation of a democratic society.

Peer response groups, as shown “in action” in the classroom activity portrayed above, had been in existence well ahead of Dewey’s time. However, as one of the definitive voices in educational philosophy, Dewey’s ideas about the value of community learning certainly give foundational justification for their continued use in the classroom.

The Collaborative Method

In theory, it makes sense that what one can do well, two can do better. We see this everyday in the world around us: from house building, to industry, to grave digging, team work is highly valued. This idea, however, has not always made the smoothest transition into the classroom setting. While many teachers have made collaborative learning a staple of their teaching approach, others are hesitant, citing classroom management problems and unequal student work contributions as key concerns that can result in group work (Danis, 1988; George, 1984; Neubert & McNelis, 1990). In many middle schools and high schools, collaborative learning has been employed with great regularity in English classrooms through the use of peer writing groups, which many teachers have employed as a part of their students’ writing process. While some have had great success in utilizing peer response groups in a way that helps students become better writers and more critical readers (Elbow, 1973; Macrorie, 1988; Miller-Cleary, 1991; Murray, 2004; Romano, 1987; Spandel, 2001; Spears, 1988, 1993), others acknowledge the tricky nature and potential shortcomings of using these groups effectively in the writing classroom (Berkenkotter, 1984; Brunjes, 1993; Harris, 1992; Newkirk, 1984; Zemelman and Daniels, 1988). At the 2010 Minnesota Council of Teachers of English conference, one break out session focused on this issue of peer response, and I sat and listened to both

presenters and participants acknowledge the fact that they have never been able to make peer response groups work effectively in their classrooms. Most of these teachers had given up on this method as one that sounds good but is hard to employ effectively. These teachers talked about their difficulties in keeping students on task and their disappointment with the superficial level of feedback that students gave to their peers. In my own classroom, however, I have seen firsthand the positive results of these groups. These types of conflicting experiences have led to a significant amount of research about peer response groups in the classroom.

More inquiry into the use of peer response groups remains both important and relevant because many teachers believe that what students can do well as writers individually, they can do even more effectively with the help of their peers throughout the writing process. Gere (1987) found that the use of writing groups leads to higher motivation, decreased anxiety about writing, and increased trust and sense of community. Brunjes (1993) discovered in her research that peer writing groups help students become self-directed learners at the same time that they strengthen students' critical thinking skills. She asserts that through peer response, students strengthen their metacognitive abilities to both identify problems in the writing and to identify strategies to fix the problem. Rule (1993) concurs with Brunjes and describes benefits for the readers as well as the writers: whereas the writers gain a sharper sense of audience and objectivity in examining their craft as writers, the readers also benefit because peer feedback helps them to gain new ideas and insights about their own writing, in addition to strengthening problem-solving skills and increasing their writing vocabulary. In a time when national

standards and expectations are pushing students to higher levels of performance and increased higher level thinking skills, effective employment of writing groups can help students empower themselves as writers. Using their own expertise and that of peers, they take control and ownership of their own writing, while becoming less dependent on their teachers.

In addition to the voices of composition experts like Brunjes, Rule, Gere and others, a wealth of research exists which supports the idea that most meaningful learning is constructive, collaborative, and finds its origins within social interaction in the classroom (Barnes, 1992; Brice, 2002; Brock & Raphael, 2003; Dudley-Marling and Searle, 1991; Howe, 2003; Launspach, 2008; Parker, 2006; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Syh-Jong, 2007; Wells, 1990, 1999, 2006; Wells & Wells, 1984). These experts make a case for dialogue as an essential component of learning in every classroom. This dialogue pushes the students to a collaborative construction of new knowledge. Through this talk, students are empowered to take ownership of their learning. Students learn to think more critically about their own ideas and about the world around them. The academic and developmental benefits of classroom talk are well documented.

The Research Question

As a high school teacher of twenty-nine years, I regularly utilize peer writing groups in my language arts classes. I have found them to be incredibly helpful as the students work through their writing processes. In my experience, these groups allow students to provide each other with an extra set of eyes, with fresh perspectives through which they are able to analyze their own writing. I have seen students use these peer

sessions as a means that leads to greater clarity in their ideas. I have also watched my students constructing knowledge together during these required classroom sessions. This work leads to clearer thesis statements, more detailed support of ideas, stronger voice, as well as more critical analysis of their own writing and that of peers. In my heart, then, I know that these groups can lead to more effective writing and thinking, and I have seen beneficial collaborative learning flourish in this setting. At the same time, however, I hear the voices of my colleagues, most of whom echo the concerns about peer writing groups that I recently heard at our state English teachers' convention, as cited above. These conflicting experiences motivate my study on this topic.

A significant amount of research has been conducted on the topic of peer writing groups in school settings. However, one of the specific areas within peer writing groups that deserves more attention is the actual discourse of the peer writing groups themselves. What is it that students say and write in these writing group sessions, and how does this affect both their group process and revision process? Gere and Abbott (1985) note that close textual analysis of the students' discourse within the writing groups has great potential in painting a clearer picture of the writing process, student attitudes about peer response groups and the teacher's role within the response work. DiPardo and Freedman (1988) call for more research surrounding the real function of student talk in the composition classroom, especially research that focuses on the internal dynamics of the groups themselves. This call has largely gone unanswered as Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong (2007) write, "few scholars have undertaken empirical studies to explore what actually happens during a peer-review session and how such activities contribute to the

development of writing skills” (p. 305). This is an area that warrants further research, and this will be the focus of this study.

The research question that guides this study is:

What happens in the students’ discourse within peer response groups in relation to the revision of student writing?

I will use sociolinguistic discourse analysis as my method of research. My expectation is that this ethnographic study will help me to describe the talk, identify important dynamics, and better understand how those dynamics function to influence the revision of student writing.

In the next chapter, I establish a theoretical framework for my research study. In addition, I highlight the research that has already been done in two specific areas: group talk and peer response groups.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework for Peer Response Groups

Peer response groups engage in talk that is intentionally designed and has clear purpose. In and through their talk, students appropriate, generate, and assimilate ideas, co-constructing new meanings and understanding—new knowledge. Talk is never “just talk,” however, and, in any response group setting, much more is going on than simply the words that students say to each other. In fact, even the words themselves do not carry a simple message but are filled instead with multiple layers of meanings and context. Because the purpose of this research project is to analyze the “talk” within peer response groups, establishing and articulating a theoretical framework is essential in making sense of what it is that students actually do and say within these groups. Drawing on the social constructivist theories of Gee, Freire, Bakhtin, and Vygotsky, this theoretical framework will serve as a lens through which the discourse of high school peer response groups can be examined and studied.

It is important to begin by examining the nature of talk itself? As noted in the paragraph above, talk is never “just talk.” It carries with it layers of complexity. Talk is, in fact, intertextual. Bakhtin (1986) argues that a text is an interwoven representation of numerous discussions, current and previous knowledge, and all experiences surrounding a given topic. Virtually everything that is said or written is said or written in response to something that has come before it. These ideas build on one another in what becomes a collective articulation of the idea. Brice (1998, 2002) clarifies this idea in her example of student talk surrounding a myth of global population. In responding to the myth that

human population grows exponentially, the students referred to multiple texts—the myth itself, previous course information from the teacher, previous class discussions, prior knowledge gained from other courses, and even hearsay information. In the process, the group created a new text, their response, which moved in yet different directions from the texts they used to create their answer. This example shows the intertextual nature of talk, the weaving of one source with another. In my own example of student talk at the start of this paper, the intertextual nature of the discourse is apparent: in analyzing Rachel’s paper, Kristen uses terms like “motivator,” “thesis statement,” and “body paragraphs,” which are clearly references to the text of earlier classroom learning. Additionally, she refers to the text of her own prior knowledge about typical grandmother/granddaughter relationships when she offers a specific rewording of a piece of Rachel’s text (“It was not just Grandma’s constant kindness to me alone that affected me; she treated others in the same way.”) In this way, the talk of the group does not simply stand by itself. Rather it interweaves with ideas that have been presented before in multiple different situations and contexts. Talk is intertextual.

Also essential in this study is an overall understanding of “discourse.” Gee (1993) maintains that students’ words identify them within a discourse community. He defines discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (p. 257). Gee likens discourse to an “identity kit” (p. 259) similar to an actor’s toolkit, for example, which tells the actor which costume to wear and how to talk and act in order to play the role in a way that audience members will

recognize. Applying this concept within the peer response groups in my classroom, students' talk would likely place them in a number of discourse communities at the same time. First, they are teens. Consequently, some of their discourse will situate them in a community of fellow students who are all of the same age. Some of my students are girls and some are boys. There is no question but that the discourse that they use connects them to a discourse community based on their gender. They are also members of a college-level English course, complete with its own norms, language and expectations. When students work in their peer response groups, they have been trained to talk about writing in a particular way. They are accustomed to using terms associated with Spandel's (2001) 6-Traits assessment model (voice, ideas, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, conventions), as well as descriptors like "unified" and "coherent." Consequently, the structure of the classroom response process automatically creates another discourse community for my students, one of focused and practiced response. This idea of multiple discourses gets at the heart of what Frank Smith meant when he wrote, people use language to claim "membership" in clubs (cited in Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991, p. 120). One of the central interests of this study, of course, is developing an understanding of how these discourses are constructed within the peer response groups.

The discourse within any group is developed, in part, through dialogue. Paulo Freire believed that learning comes through dialogue. Freire (2000) defines dialogue as "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name the world" and asserts that "if it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world,

transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” (p. 88). With this idea, Freire points to the authority of knowledge and the importance of providing students with the autonomy to engage in their own construction of knowledge. Freire goes on to argue that dialogue “seals the act of knowing, which is never individual, even though it has its individual dimension” (cited in Shor & Freire, pp. 3-4). Literacy, according to Freire, should be acquired in the context of social settings. Learning is not something that is done to someone; rather, knowledge is constructed through mutual dialogue between students and the teachers. It is no surprise that Freire is critical of a “banking theory”-approach to education, where schools and teachers think of students as empty vessels who need to be “filled” with knowledge. Instead, he calls for a “problem-posing education” (cited in Johnson & Reed, p. 212), where teachers and students work collaboratively to frame questions about the world around them and then work to solve those questions. As participants in educational dialogue, both teachers and students, in essence, re-form themselves. Teachers learn to reposition themselves in the classroom, giving up the role of all-knowing conveyor of knowledge and moving into a new role of classroom facilitator. With this, teachers yield authority over the discourse and knowledge and let the group function with a certain degree of autonomy. In this process, students also transform themselves; they no longer sit passively as sponges, absorbing knowledge that is presented by the teacher. They now take control of their own learning, constructing knowledge in their peer groups.

Stock (1995), drawing on the ideas of Freire and Bakhtin, describes a dialogic curriculum that finds its foundation in teachers’ inviting and enabling students to join

them in a process of collaborative inquiry. The dialogic curriculum develops as students and teachers work together to strengthen and expand their abilities in inquiry through reading, writing, and talk. Stock's approach is exactly the kind of repositioning of traditional teacher roles that Freire (2000) calls for.

Freire's ideas of dialogue also connect in a very natural way to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which clarifies a relationship that exists between the writers and readers and what they "say" to each other. Bakhtin (1986) argues that everything that is said is said in response to something that came before it. Dale (1992) explains this principle further when she notes that, in Bakhtin's perspective, no writer works alone because all writing is an interaction with many readers in the world. Barnes and Todd (1995) argue that the concept of dialogism is based in an understanding that all discourse is both situated in and controlled by context: the words that a person speaks carry assumptions and understandings that are directly tied to when and in what context they were spoken. These assumptions and understandings, then, provide new context for the words of the next speaker. In this way, the words never belong to the speaker alone; rather they carry with them the intentions of others. Bakhtin (1986), in his own words, explains how participation in group discourse allows the participant to appropriate the learning that is encountered in interactions with others:

The unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances . . . Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works) is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,'

varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework and accentuate. (cited in Wells, 1999. p. 104)

This assimilation of the ideas of others in order to construct new knowledge is one of the benefits of the discourse of peer response groups. Wells (2000) suggests that a group setting is the perfect place for this appropriation to occur.

Clearly, dialogism brings the concept of authorial ownership into question, calling for a sort of multi-ownership of the writing rather than an individual ownership. Spigelman (2000) describes the complex relationship between writer and reader in a peer response group setting: readers do not passively “receive” each other’s papers; instead they integrate them into their own thought processes and arrive at a final product that is, in fact, partly owned by the writer and partly by the responder to the earlier draft.

Taken together, Gee’s idea of discourse and Bakhtin’s dialogism help us to understand dialogue as a tool through which students collaborate to construct new understandings and knowledge. The framework is not complete, however, without a closer look at the social nature of knowledge building.

Another essential theoretical concept for the purpose of this study is Vygotsky’s assertion that language and high-level mental functions develop through a social framework. In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky (1986) writes, “Development in thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual” (p. 36). In his earlier work, Vygotsky details the process of cognitive development:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. (cited in Wertsch, 1991, p. 26)

We develop in our thinking, first, on a social level by interacting with others for purposes of basic needs and daily function. Through our interactions with others, we come to understand ourselves. This understanding, according to Vygotsky, is developed through the use of psychological tools, or signs, which give us control over our mental behavior (Dixon-Kraus, 1996). These signs give us the ability to change both our behavior and our thinking. For example, during the school year, it is sadly necessary for my colleagues and me to leave notes to ourselves saying, "Correct 3rd hour essays!" Such reminders function as signs to change our behavior, in this case, by reminding us to pick up the pile of essays and evaluate them. This process of words augmenting our actions is what Vygotsky would call "semiotic mediation." Vygotsky's process of "internalization" also occurs in this movement from social activity to internal skill.

Most current literacy pedagogy uses Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural development as a framework for knowledge building. Wink and Putney (2002) argue that, from Vygotsky's perspective, the acquisition of new ideas is most valuable when students are allowed to construct their own knowledge and make discoveries on their own. This happens in the largest degree when students are able to collaborate with each other on topics that are of interest to them. Like Freire and Bakhtin, Vygotsky asserts that it is by talking with one another, in a safe environment, that students most effectively

make meaning. For Vygotsky (1986), all learning comes through the language that is shared by individuals. Skills in reasoning are socially constructed through interaction between adults and fellow students. Franklin asserts that knowledge is created and re-created when people collaborate together. She elaborates on three important elements of knowledge building: 1) it is an essential part of “doing things” 2) it is created between people and 3) it occurs as they make meaning through the use of discourse (cited in Wells, 2000, p. 71). These modern-day interpretations of Vygotsky’s theories, which will be addressed in greater detail in the next section of this chapter, speak to the importance of collaborative learning opportunities like peer response groups.

Other essential components of the Vygotskian theory of the social nature of learning are the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD), in relation to the sociocultural world within which student learning occurs. These theories have received incredible attention in the area of literacy studies over the past several decades (Combs, 1996; Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Jennings & Di, 1996; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; McMahon, 1996; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wells, 2000; Wink & Putney, 2002). Vygotsky (1978) defines the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration of more capable peers” (p. 86). Vygotsky argues that it is the current level of development and the ZPD that give us the clearest view of the student as a learner. “The zone of proximal development permits us to delineate the child’s immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what has been

achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing” (p. 87).

Vygotsky’s ideas suggest that when students can receive instruction from someone who is more capable in that content area, the learner will be able to internalize that idea and will have the ability to perform independently in a future situation with similar content. In other words, the experiences learned through the help of the more capable peer will transfer in a new situation to independent application. Wertsch (1991) restates Vygotsky’s belief that measuring the potential level of development is as important as measuring the ZAD, and, in regard to teaching objectives, Wertsch notes that the instruction should be geared to the level of potential development.

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) describe this theory in a four-step process: First, performance is assisted by more capable others. At this point the child’s understanding is very limited, and, consequently, she may simply imitate, or defer to, the more knowledgeable person. During the second step, however, the child is assisted by the self. The child is able to carry out the task by herself, but the performance is not fully automated. Third, the performance becomes “fossilized.” During this step, the task is internalized and automated, and assistance from others is no longer needed. Tharp and Gallimore note, however, that this fossilization does not mean the process is complete. In the final step, de-automatization of the performance ability leads to recursion back through the ZPD. Due to environmental changes, physical trauma, stress, or like causes, what the child had been able to do, she no longer can do. Consequently, the developmental process becomes recursive, and the child proceeds back to assisted-performance phase, then to self-regulated performance, and finally passes back through

the ZPD again onto a new automatization. Now the child can apply the skill in novel situations, transferring what she has learned.

It is this Vygotskian framework that justifies and argues for collaborative experiences in any classroom. As DiPardo and Freedman (1988) note, “Peer group talk about the activity of writing is thus aligned with the Vygotskian premise that writing is a deeply social act—an act that encompasses far more than the goals and conceptions of any individual instructor” (p. 131). Certainly, in an era when high-stakes state and national examinations have become the norm, putting this theory into classroom action has the potential of moving students farther in their academic development and performance than work in isolation can. This, again, points to the value of using peer response groups in the classroom.

Essential then to this research project is this theoretical framework which articulates the following:

- that all “talk” within communities is a complex, intertextual weaving of the collective ideas of the group
- that, through the use of talk, communities of learning develop into discourse communities
- that knowledge is socially constructed through the use dialogue
- and that learning occurs in a social context through a recursive process affected by both the current level and the potential level of development.

Literature Review

Studies about talk. A great deal of research has focused on this question of student talk. A number of current researchers have applied and extended both Vygotsky's and Bakhtin's theories, in particular, in relation to how students use talk to construct knowledge. An examination of some of these studies will show that, although these two theorists are no longer living, their ideas are alive and well in classrooms around the world.

Wells (1990) builds his view of literacy learning on a Vygotskian model. He considers talk to be critical in the construction of knowledge. He describes five functions, or modes, that written words have come to play with readers: performative, functional, informational, re-creational, and epistemic. Although each of these is important, Wells notes that the epistemic mode is the most critical. In this mode, textual meaning is not something that is predetermined and waiting to be acquired (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996); rather it is viewed as an entry point into textual discovery, both on the part of the writer and the readers. Wells argues that this epistemic engagement, that is, creating transactions between what is on the page and what is in the head, is critical in order to be truly literate. Haneda and Wells (2000) expand on this idea, arguing that

the process of becoming literate is inherently social in nature, even though it is individuals who read and write. Literacy events do not take place in isolation, but in relation to a discourse community of which the reader or writer is, or wishes to become a member. (p. 432)

And here a key problem is introduced: in many current classrooms, little opportunity exists for students to engage texts in the epistemic mode. Because of current pressures that teachers feel to cover the curriculum, brought on by the increasing state and federal political cries for accountability, many teachers default to a transmission-oriented approach to teaching, or what Freire (2000) referred to as the “banking theory.” In fact, in many classrooms, very little meaningful talk happens. Wells and Wells (1984) cite a number of reasons for this: the high number of students in each class, a restrictive curriculum, and a traditional belief that teachers are not doing their jobs unless they are presenting information themselves through direct instruction. Consequently, many schools are not providing the students with a linguistically rich environment. However, how can we create such an environment? According to Wells (1990), it happens through genuine engagement in collaborative classroom talk. He describes “an intellectual apprenticeship” model, based on Vygotsky’s work with a more knowledgeable other, which allows students to move to higher levels of understanding. Allowing students to talk, with the help of a more skilled peer, can lead to the highest levels of literacy learning. Wells argues for an approach that leads to transactional construction of knowledge. Wells and Wells (1984) call for a commitment to collaborative interaction on the part of classroom teachers. This collaboration will nurture talk about text and provide students with opportunities to appropriate mental activities that are essential to literacy.

Wells (1999, 2006) does not stop with Vygotsky. He also draws on Bakhtinian theory when he analyzes both the monologic and dialogic functions of texts. In an age where it seems that nothing matters but standardized test scores, too many schools are

ready to adopt a monologic approach, which can be implemented system-wide with prescribed curricular goals and scripted lesson plans. Teachers can simply talk at students. Wells notes, though, that our history shows us that knowledge is not created most effectively in this monologic mode. Rather it is when people have the ability to engage in discourse with one another that they have the best opportunity to solve problems. Likewise, in the classroom, it is a dialogic approach to inquiry that will lead to the most effective construction of knowledge.

Dudley-Marling and Searle (1991) build on the benefits of student talk in the learning of language. The authors note that it is essential that teachers give students the opportunity to talk because through such discursive experiences students are able to make a number of pivotal educational gains:

1. Students speak and listen in order to get information, and, consequently, continue to develop as language users.
2. Students are able to stretch their linguistic abilities.
3. In using classroom talk, students are able to utilize their background knowledge in making meaning in new situations.
4. As students use talk in the classroom, teachers are given a window into the current state of students' language development and can focus future instruction to these abilities.
5. In a classroom where students are encouraged to talk, students and teachers are able to get to know each other and soon are able to collaborate in constructing knowledge.

Dudley-Marling and Searle (1991) believe that teachers have almost unlimited power with which to engage students in meaningful talk; this becomes a process where students use talk to make sense of new situations by relating them to their prior experiences, and, in the process, relate familiar experiences in words in order to make meaning of these new experiences. This talk allows students to construct a new world view based on their interactions with others. Even “talk around the edges,” that is, talk that may appear to stray from the intent of the lesson, has the potential of engaging students in extended talk that will nurture the students’ language repertoire.

Barnes (1992) also extends the ideas of Vygotsky and builds his own theory of literacy that champions the work of Freire. Stressing the essential nature of talk in the classroom, Barnes coins the expression “exploratory talk” (p. 28), talk that hesitates, rephrases, and changes direction, all of which he asserts are important elements in the process of the assimilation of new knowledge. The more that learners are able to take control of their own language strategies, the more they are able to make and explore meaningful hypotheses about the world around them. It is talk, Barnes argues, that empowers students to examine the bases with which they interpret reality, and, in doing so, they are able to change that reality. It is here that Barnes bridges into the ideas of Freire. Like Freire (2000), Barnes opposes the transmission theory (“banking theory”) of teaching, which dehumanizes the learners’ true purposes in learning and limits their application of this new knowledge by restricting their ability to speak and, thus, apply the knowledge. Instead Barnes calls for an approach to teaching where classroom dialogue dominates and where students talk and write to bring out their existing and new

knowledge. This approach, Barnes argues, can empower students in a way that is parallel to the political empowerment that Freire's peasants achieved with their newfound literacy skills. In this manner, students will have the control of knowledge, which Barnes believes is central to true success in attaining their education.

The ideas of Gavelek and Raphael (1996) effectively extend Barnes' theory. Building on Vygotsky's general law of cultural development, these authors offer a theoretical perspective of why talk within the classroom can be so important in learning to read literature. For Gavelek and Raphael, talk goes much farther than just providing an authentic audience and purpose for the learners: it creates the very means by which students are able to construct new meanings and new knowledge. In supporting this idea, the authors draw on Harré's (1984) model of the Vygotsky Space, which consists of four kinds of dimensions: 1) public/social 2) private/social 3) private/individual and 4) public/individual. Harré maintains that at any given time, learners' cognitive functioning occurs within one of these quadrants, and in the course of their development, they move through these quadrants recursively. Through a process of appropriation, transformation, publication, and conventionalization, students are able to construct knowledge. Gavelek and Raphael assert that, through both public and social discourse, students are able to take what they have learned and transform it in a way that is meaningful to them. This transformation is then made public and becomes a part of the conventionalized knowledge of the classroom.

The additional work of Raphael and her colleagues (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, & Highfield, 2001;

Raphael & McMahon, 1994) details the Book Club and Book Club Plus processes, whereby students are able to take ownership and control of their own knowledge building regarding reading literature. Building on the ideas of Gee (1992), these authors created formats where students are provided with the tools that they need to successfully engage in discourse communities within the classroom. Consequently, these teachers have been able to harness the power of conversation in the classroom in a way that leads to meaningful construction of knowledge on the part of their students.

The work of these scholars has been essential in understanding the important role that talk has in constructing knowledge. In addition to this understanding, it is important to have foundational knowledge about peer response groups themselves. This background information is provided next.

A brief history of peer response groups. Peer response groups are not new. In fact, Gere (1987) traces them back to the eighteenth century with literary societies that were formed for the purposes of debating political and social issues of the time, in addition to analyzing compositions in order to improve writing skills. These groups became so popular that universities began to embrace their mission; in fact, writing instructors at such institutions as Yale, University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins, MIT, and Middlebury College began incorporating writing groups into their curriculum. Eventually, the use of peer response groups filtered down into secondary schools and, by 1880, professional publications for secondary school teachers were writing about some of the benefits of these groups. Peer response groups continued to find advocates up through the middle of the twentieth century although Gere (1987) notes that it was the Dartmouth

Conference of 1966 that created an intellectual culture that was more supportive of writing groups than had been the case in earlier decades. Consequently, in 1967 when the Beatles first sang, “I’ll get by with a little help from my friends,” they unknowingly foreshadowed two decades of incredible attention being given to the use of peer writing groups in the secondary school classroom, that of the 70s and 80s.

Process writing, writers’ workshop and peer response groups. In examining the recent history of writing instruction in the classroom, it is apparent that a relatively small group of composition experts have had a powerful impact on the development of both a process- and a writers’-workshop approach to the teaching of writing. These powerful voices articulated ideas that resonated in schools across America, and their impact cannot be overstated. They need to be credited with laying a foundation that has nurtured peer response groups as an effective method of teaching writing, and their ideas and accomplishments deserve some attention in this paper.

In 1968 two publications made a profound impact on the teaching of composition, Donald Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing* and James Moffett’s *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*. Murray calls on writing teachers to reexamine their approaches to teaching composition, arguing for a process approach (prewriting, writing, and rewriting), which places more value on the experience of writing than on the final product. He also advocates methods that help students to be able to evaluate their own writing. Moffett, in addition to clarifying a broader spectrum of discourses that most accurately represent the real writing purposes in the world, urges realistic purposes in writing tasks and stresses the importance of teacher and classmates as audience for student writing. These works

have been seminal in bridging the ideas that came out of the Dartmouth Conference with the process-oriented approaches that have dominated writing classrooms from the 1980s to the present time.

Elbow (1973) extends the importance of peers as responders in the writing process as he calls for a classroom without teachers. He argues that teachers are, ultimately, more valuable to students when the teachers realize that they are, in fact, not needed; students can construct knowledge themselves. Elbow urges students to rely on each other: two heads are better than one. When students interact with each other, according to Elbow, they talk about each other's writing and, in essence, help in "restructuring and reorienting" the writer's ideas (p. 50). This process extends Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, acknowledging that virtually everything that is said about a text becomes a part of that text. This idea brings us back to the essential nature of talk in constructing knowledge.

Writing at the same time as Elbow, Bruffee (1973) was among the first of a number of nationally recognized writing teachers to openly advocate for the use of collaborative learning in the writing classroom. Acknowledging the fact that teachers, at that time, did not see validity in collaborative learning, he urged reconsideration. In his work, Bruffee argues that students have the ability to be focused audience members for a piece of writing long before they themselves are polished writers. His later work (Bruffee, 1981) draws on Vygotskian theory in asserting that knowledge is inherently social and that collaborative learning helps learners to personalize knowledge so that they can, in essence, claim it as their own. Finally, Bruffee (1984) elaborates on the important

relationship between conversation and writing when he writes, “If thought is internalized public and social talk, then writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again” (p. 641). Bruffee asserts that a writer’s ability to write an essay depends on her ability to talk with herself about the issues, and her ability to talk about these issues with herself comes directly from her ability to converse with others; they are, in fact, interconnected processes.

Macrorie (1980, 1988), another expert in composition to receive prominence, empowers students to take control of their own research content through his I-Search projects. In the process, he stresses the critical importance of peer response allowing the writer to see how her words are coming across to others. Macrorie highlights a process that writers can use to receive the feedback of others openly and without defensive posturing.

Calkins (1986, 2008) became one of the definitive voices of a process-oriented writing instruction. Her workshop approach is framed on the understanding that we write as a means of understanding our lives. That understanding is most richly developed when we have the opportunity to see ourselves as authors and to hear how our words impact others. Hence, she calls for essential response to writing from both teachers and peers.

Perl (1986) describes a recursive writing process, where writers are guided by their “felt sense” (p. 32), or inner voice. Writers build language from this inner voice, revisiting the language, revising the language and then moving forward in a continually recursive process, which Perl calls “retrospective structuring” (p. 35). At the same time, however, writers project themselves in the role of readers, knowing that what they write

needs to be intelligible to others, a process Perl calls “projective structuring” (p. 35). Together these two processes form the “alternating mental postures writers assume as they move through the act of composing” (p. 35).

Perhaps no one showed with greater clarity the power and potential of a workshop approach to the teaching of writing than did Atwell (1987, 1998). Building on an understanding that students and teachers can work side-by-side to develop curriculum and to construct knowledge, Atwell pioneered a workshop approach to writing that was entirely responsive to students’ individual needs. Essential to the structure of her workshop approach was ongoing communication, through writing and through talk, between both teachers and students and between students and students.

The works of these early scholars—writings about both process- and workshop-writing methods—provided essential frameworks for the thousands and thousands of writing teachers who came after them. It is through these early works that we are able to gain a comprehensive understanding of other research that has been completed in the use of peer response groups.

Classroom-based research about peer response groups. Additional research on peer response groups and anecdotal evidence from classroom teachers reveal other important ideas about peer response groups. Among these are organizational considerations, peer response groups with non-native English speakers, issues of social power with peer response groups, and the effect of the response on student writers. The next section of the study will provide an overview of these studies and classroom experiences.

Organization and process of peer response groups. A number of studies have focused specifically on how teachers can organize and implement peer writing groups most effectively in the classroom. Pacheco's (1994) research suggests that students need to be introduced to the process of classroom response. When teachers model effective peer response for the students and provide students with detailed guidelines about how to proceed, students not only are able to respond effectively to peers, but the student responders note that they enjoyed the experience. Ros (1993) found in her study of ten Dutch elementary schools that the degree of success with students staying on task in their peer writing groups was positively correlated to the organizational factors and the teacher's behavior while the students were working. Factors such as group structure and group composition affected the students' interaction. In addition, the more proactive the teachers were at monitoring the activities of the groups, the more focused the students were within the groups. Carroll (1986) concurs and extends this idea by highlighting a process that she has used successfully in peer writing groups in her classroom. She encourages teachers to help students get started in their groups by being involved in the formation process, by providing guidelines to direct the student response work, by intervening when necessary, but, most importantly, by giving the students freedom to work independently as they want to. Calkins (2008), although known for her work with elementary-aged writers, presents a process called "receiving the piece," which is useful with writers of all ages. This simple process has peer responders summarize the piece for the writer, which boosts both the confidence and the security level within the group, and it sets the stage for serious consideration of the feedback that will be received. Neubert

and McNelis (1990) highlight a process called Praise-Question-Polish, which they use to begin and focus peer response sessions. In addition, the authors note that teaching students to respond specifically is essential. They do this by designing both small-group and full-class activities to model effective, detailed response. VanDeWeghe (2004) builds on these ideas as he traces the detailed process of three teachers who have had success in getting their students to provide high-level response within their peer group work. In studies conducted in the schools of these teachers, the findings pointed to that fact that students must be taught how to provide helpful response. It is not a skill that most students bring innately into the classroom.

Using annotated transcripts of student group sessions, coupled with copies of student work in both draft and finished form, Spears (1988) focuses the heart of her book on providing teachers with specific suggestions for ways of structuring the classroom in a manner that makes peer response a regular and integral part of classroom process. In doing this, Spears counters the popular stereotype of writing as a solitary activity, intended to be performed individually behind closed doors. Rather she asserts that through peer group collaboration, students can learn that it is not just the product that the writer ends up with; rather all of the activities that students participate in throughout the writing process in their peer groups provide a richness of experience that helps to counter the artificiality of many writing classroom settings.

Emerging language learners. In addition to organizational, process-oriented research on peer response, a number of researchers have found positive effects of peer writing groups on students who do not speak English as their native language. Meier

(2001) found great success with peer response groups with his Spanish speaking students when he worked closely with them, providing detailed scaffolding so that they can develop the skill and confidence to respond meaningfully to their peers. Over time, Meier found that he could wean himself away from the students and that they could achieve group success independently. Although Prater and Bermudez (1993) found no significant quantitative differences in essays after peer response groups met and their students revised, they did find the overall fluency of the participating E.L.L. students was enhanced, in addition to the students gaining a number of social benefits from the collaboration. Spence (2003) found that E.L.L. students succeeded in peer response groups because, when students took the lead in group discussion about writing, they were able to “co-construct” (p. 531) the text in a meaningful way. Students learned through the experience that they did, in fact, have valuable things to say about each others’ writing. Finally, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) conclude that teachers should allow students who are learning a second language to engage in peer response groups because the groups help these students to probe their own ideas, in addition to helping them nurture a sense of audience, an idea that is important with all writers, not just E.L.L. students. In this study the students themselves reported the use of the peer response to be a helpful form of feedback with their writing.

Issues of social power. Separate from this work with E.L.L. students, a number of researchers have focused their studies on issues of social power within writing groups. Somers (1993) highlights four critical problems that can develop within the social structure of the writing group: 1) student who are developmentally behind the others in

the group and can, consequently, only offer repetitious response, 2) recent immigrants who, typically, fear and avoid writing groups, 3) group members—typically males—who interrupt and dominate group discussions, and 4) very skilled writers who overwhelm the others in the group. The author's findings highlight the importance of the teachers' roles in overseeing the group interaction. Teachers need to develop and implement rules for the group work, address power issues explicitly, and give groups the autonomy to resolve these issues independently without overt intervention on the part of the teachers. Sirc (1991) acknowledges the stark differences in response approaches between boys and girls: boys lean towards aggressiveness in response, while the feminine approach relies on an emotional response, which provides support for the writer's effort. These differences cannot be ignored, argues Sirc. He suggests that, in order to address these differences, the focus of peer response needs to be shifted away from the masculine framework, which highlights judgment and evaluation, and rather move towards a feminine perspective of the "imaginative realms of discourse" (p. 10). Hasley (1989), in her study of female freshman composition students, addresses some potential difficulties for females in peer writing groups. Her research shows that, although there was no overall statistical difference between the females and males in either teacher-lecture or peer-group formats, it did appear that females did not fare as well as males did in the peer group setting. Davis (1988) points in the opposite direction in his study of five college freshman, where the participants were taped during the twelfth week of their writing course as they responded to each others' writing. He found that the female participants, although only 60% of the research population, accounted for 85% of the total group

conversation. This leads Davis to wonder if there is something in the socialization process of peer response groups that makes women more likely to engage than men.

The effects of peer response on student writing. Finally, a number of researchers have focused their work on how the peer feedback that is provided in the peer response groups actually affects the revisions that students make in their writing. Karegianes, Pascarella, and Pflaum (1980) directed a quasi-experimental study to examine the effects of a highly-structured peer-response-group treatment on low-achieving tenth-grade writers. Participants of the study were 49 low-achieving students at an inner-city school. Studying students who participated in peer response groups compared with students who worked in teacher response groups, with only the editing situation differentiating the subject treatment, this study found that the peer editing was at least as effective as, if not more effective than, teacher editing.

Rijlaarsdam and Schoonen (1988) found similar results as they examined the effects of peer response on the writing performance of ninth-grade students. The data were collected from eleven teachers in eight schools. Each teacher taught two ninth-grade sections, one section employing traditional teacher-directed feedback to writing and a second section utilizing peer feedback. The results of the quantitative study revealed no significant difference in the writing performance of students between the peer-response and the teacher-response formats. In addition, gender and writing proficiency level also had little effect as to the type of feedback that was given.

Using dialogic discourse analysis, Nystrand (1999) found that regular peer response group work gives students an opportunity to “try out their drafts” (p. 17) on

peers. His study suggests that, when prepared to respond to each other, students are able to help each other improve their writing abilities. Students were able to identify content ambiguities and structural problems in each others' writings; their collective brainstorming proved to be effective in helping students find solutions to problems within their specific writings.

Ziv (1983) focused her studies on college freshman writers whom she trained at the beginning of the semester to first respond to the content ideas of their peers before giving any feedback on mechanical aspects of the writing. In the early process, comments were largely general and positive, but superficial. Along with these positive comments, the responders also included criticisms of both content and form. Ziv found that student writers became defensive of these criticisms and did not use them in meaningful ways in the revision process. The author notes that it is only through patience on the part of the teacher that a sense of trust will be developed within the group. In addition, the teacher plays an essential role in establishing an environment in which peer groups can succeed. In this study, it was only with this commitment that the peer comments moved from surface-level praise or general criticisms to a deeper-level of feedback that actually did, then, help to improve the students' subsequent drafts.

Lockhart and Ng (1993) found that peer response groups were useful to Chinese student writers in a number of ways: First, the students found that peer response was beneficial in helping them develop their ideas in a clear manner in their writing. Additionally, peer response groups helped writers foster a clearer sense of audience because they were able to understand the impression that their readers received

from their writing. The authors note that peer response also seems to strengthen the writing skills of the reader. Through the peer response process, the writer is able to read a variety of writing styles and can come to understand what is effective writing. Finally, the authors note that their subjects enjoyed expressing their ideas to their peers, and they were thus able to strengthen their skills in articulating their own ideas, orally, in a clear manner.

Kinsler (1990) studied the use of peer response groups with 37 college students who were in need of writing remediation. Half of the students received traditional teacher feedback; the other half received structured response from a peer group. Although there were no differences in the passing rate between the two groups on the required exit essay exam, a number of gains are noteworthy in the group that received the peer response. The peer collaboration is credited with strengthening the students' revision skills, with helping students develop a clearer sense of audience, as well as improving their abilities to self-monitor their writings, particularly in the areas of clarity of main ideas and organization. Kinsler notes that the use of the response groups, then, does help students develop an "internal sense of audience" (p. 316), which is frequently missing with students who need writing remediation.

Analyzing the transcripts of students' talk, Peterson (2003) studied the response of eighth grade writers and found that their revisions were influenced by both the informal interactions received by peers during the writing of narrative essays and by more formal feedback giving during peer response group sessions. Based on the feedback that they received, students made revisions at both the sentence level and at the broader

organizational level. The study showed that the peer response directly affected the revision process, although writers also made changes that went beyond the scope of the peer response.

Asserting that peer response is one of the most widely used practices in first-year college writing courses, Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong (2007) used eye-movement research methodologies to study which parts of texts peer reviewers actually looked at. Their study revealed that students are frequently tentative in their feedback because they lack confidence in the validity of their response ideas. The eye-movement analysis, however, demonstrated that students are able to identify areas of the text that offer rich feedback potential. The researchers note that most teachers who employ peer writing groups have students first review texts for holistic content or form issues (whole-essay issues) and only later for traditional editing (sentence-level) issues. This research, however, suggests that it might be advisable for teachers to reconsider this approach. If students' reading is constantly compromised by surface errors, their ability to comprehend the text holistically may also be compromised.

Launspach (2008) found that talk in peer writing groups helped students to build declarative knowledge and develop procedural strategies that they, in turn, could use to improve their own writing. She utilized conversation analysis in a case study approach to examine the discourse of students participating in a small writing group. She described the declarative knowledge as the understanding of the "what" of a topic; procedural knowledge is the knowing "how." In particular, she showed how students use talk to develop declarative knowledge and try out process strategies in order to bridge the gap

between knowing what to do and knowing how to do it. As a result of her research, Launspach believes that teachers need to provide students with strategic scaffolding that will help them in this process of knowledge building.

Certainly not all research has found only positive outcomes of peer response groups. Berkenkotter (1984), in a case study with ten students in a freshman composition class, acknowledges that peers provide additional perspectives for writers and that the peer response is typically not perceived to be as threatening as the teacher's response is; however, she goes on to suggest that, because of the complex emotional and intellectual factors at play, the response might not be as overtly helpful as many teachers would like to believe it is. She calls for more research on the writer/responder relationship and how that information can translate into meaningful teaching pedagogy.

Newkirk (1984), in his study of collegiate freshman, follows Berkenkotter in addressing the tricky nature of using peer response groups effectively. He is particularly critical of the notion that the peer response group should be the writer's main audience. Still, he acknowledges the value of the groups in allowing students to apply the criteria that they are using in their writing classrooms. In order for the groups to succeed, however, Newkirk maintains that the teacher needs to make the norms of the classroom transparent and that it is best to see the students as apprentices attempting to apply those norms to the classroom setting. Students will not have these skills innately; they need to be taught how to be a constructive member of this new community. George (1984) agrees with the idea that teachers need to teach students how to respond effectively and serve as

the facilitator as the groups are meeting. In this regard, she asserts that peer response groups are an incredible amount of work for both the teacher and the students.

One of the frequent criticisms of peer response work is the idea that students are frequently off task when working in their groups. The research of Gere and Abbott (1985) allays this concern by showing that students are, in fact, on task in their writing groups and that the vast majority of the comments they make do focus on the content of writing. The authors found that writing groups help students to become more conscious of their own writing. Other benefits include the multiple perspectives that the response group process brings to the writer's work, in addition to the development of a clearer awareness of audience. A challenge that Gere and Abbott bring forth is the idea that, although the teacher makes every effort to help the groups develop a sense of autonomy, the teacher—as eventual evaluator—is an ever-present force within the groups. In other words, as much as the student writers will listen to the ideas of their peers, they are equally cognizant of what the teacher will be expecting in the final draft. This can have a dampening effect on the overall effectiveness of the response group.

Spigelman (2000) discusses one challenging effect of the peer group process—loss of textual ownership. During the response group process, writers are expected to give up their writing as a subject of the group response effort. The writing, at least for the short-term, becomes a kind of community property. On the other side, readers are expected to move from the role of passive outsiders reading a piece to the perspective of co-writers of the selections that are being read. This idea brings us back to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which was discussed earlier in Chapter 2. This question of textual

ownership is an important consideration in understanding why students do not sometimes use the advice of their peers in their revision process. This can lead the participants down a dangerous slope. If writers do not feel ownership in what they are writing, they are, in fact, more inclined to become disengaged with their writing. This has grave implications in that the writers could potentially be submitting work to their teachers that they, as writers, ultimately, care little about. From a teaching perspective, this situation could lead to a less-than-best effort on the part of the students. On the other hand, as Spigelman notes, if the writers are able to maintain authorial authority, they are much more inclined to share their writing with others in their group and to actually use the suggestions that the peers provide. Add to this complexity, the fact that the silent presence of the teacher can always be felt in any writing group. Similar to the ideas suggested by Gere and Abbott (1985), Spigelman acknowledges that the writers in particular will always have the teacher-as-future-evaluator in their mind as they are working their writings through various drafts.

Obviously, the studies about the effect of peer response are less than definitive. Although some researchers have found positive results, others highlight potential shortcomings of the process. Without a doubt, however, the strongest advocates for peer response groups are those teachers who share successful personal stories. Some of these stories are featured next.

Teacher success stories. A fair amount of literature highlights individual success stories of teachers who make peer groups work effectively in their classes each day. Reimer (1993) shares how she has been able to develop a spirit of collaboration among

her seventh grade students, which has led her students to more effective, critical readings of each other's papers. She details the response sessions of two of her writing groups and asserts that her students can learn from each other, whether they are in highly structured groups or in noisy, free-flowing groups.

Coombs (1993) describes three successful 8th grade groups as a starting point and then traces their individual processes which led to that success. Composing and responding become a seamless process in her class, which has the luxury of a well designed computer lab in which to work.

Kraemer (1993) and Laney (1993) both address the idea that in order for peer groups to find ultimate success, the teacher needs to be willing to let go, to a certain extent, of traditional teacher control. The concept of Freire's "banking theory," where teachers stand in front of the classroom and control the learning by filling their passive students with knowledge is replaced with a model that is constructivist in nature.

Kraemer empowers her students to become self-sufficient in their ability to decide what makes good writing. Her 10th graders have incredible freedom in terms of their purposes for writing and their specific topics. They bring fresh ideas and perspectives to their peer response because Kraemer has unshackled them from many of the teacher requirements that tie them down in daily classroom tasks. In the end, Kraemer's goal is met: she wants her students to "own their writing," (p. 148), and they do. Laney provides a detailed picture of a successful response group and of a struggling response group. She notes that if we expect students to be able to maximize their performance, we need to free them up within the classroom to make their own decisions, decisions that include not only

audience and purpose, but also include with whom they will share their writing and the ground rules for that sharing. In her vision, the teacher's role is that of facilitator not director.

Ause (1993) notes that students' hesitancy to trust each other's opinions can be a result of their overdependence on a teaching style that relies on traditional transmission theory. To counter this, Ause employs a writing workshop approach in her classroom, emphasizing peer interaction, and has been able to free her students in a way that they now take the initiative for their own learning. The greatest benefit, Ause notes, is the powerful sense of community the students develop within their writing groups. Her students learn that they can rely on each other and learn from each other.

Dean (2005), who focused on specific strategies in her writing classroom to help her students in various stages of the writing process, found that her students considered peer response to be the most valuable strategy they had learned to actually help them improve their craft as writers. Along these same lines, Enders (2001) conducted a survey study about the transition from high school to college writing for students and found that one of the most effective methods to get high school writers ready for collegiate writing was to allow them to evaluate writing, particularly in the setting of peer response groups.

The need for more research. Without a doubt, a significant amount of research has been conducted about the use of peer response groups in the classroom. The specific topics of that research vary considerably from group structure to peer response with non-native speakers to the effects of the collaboration, to name a few. Within this literature, however, there are some gaps. One important area of study that deserves more attention is

the student language itself within the peer response groups. What is it that students actually say and write to each other and how does that discourse inform the actual revision that students undertake?

Chapter 3. Research Methods

As the previous chapter clarifies, a great deal of research has been done on the use of peer writing groups in the classroom. A variety of sub-topics have been represented in this research: writer's workshop and peer writing groups, effective implementation of groups, writing groups with E.L.L. students, and the effects of peer response on student writers, to review a few of the topics. As noted previously, one area that deserves more research is the students' talk itself. This leads us to the research question: What happens in students' discourse within peer response groups in relation to the revision of student writing? The next section of the study will focus on the design of this research study, which will include a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of this student talk.

In this study, I adopted an interpretive approach (Erickson, 1986) to study the discourse of students in peer writing groups and its relation to the revision of student writing, drawing from sociolinguistics, group communication, and literacy. Hymes (1972) maintains that language (discourse) should be studied as it is situated in patterned communication events. This approach to analysis, grounded in the activities of real people engaged in discussion, complements Bakhtin's theoretical notions of intertextual references and Vygotsky's ideas about the sociocultural nature of dialogue and thought (Maybin, 1994).

Setting of the Study

The research was conducted at a high school of approximately 700 students, located in a northern Minnesota city of 9000 residents. The school district of this white collar community serves a total of 2000 students with one elementary school, one middle

school and one high school. The school district does not have a great deal of racial or religious diversity. Eleven percent of the student population receives free-and/or-reduced lunch.

Participants in the Study

The research participants were high school seniors, seventeen and eighteen years old, who were enrolled in an AP/College-in-the-Schools Composition I course. This is a thirteen-week course, offered through an area college, where students receive high school and college credits concurrently. An entrance requirement of the course is that the students are in the top 25% of their class academically, or that they perform well on a required entrance writing sample. Consequently, participants in the study were students who entered the class with strong academic skills and who had already experienced a great deal of academic success.

Curriculum and Structure of Peer Response Groups

Because this AP/College-in-the-Schools Composition I course is offered for college credit, the curriculum is directed by the sponsoring college and focuses on academic writing. Students design and write five essays during the term, among them, essays in the following modes: division and classification, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, and argumentation.

The school district's English department (K-12) utilizes and emphasizes the well established 6-Traits writing assessment method (Spandel, 2001). This writing method is utilized, in particular, so that students hear teachers using consistent language across grade levels to talk about writing. Students, therefore, came into this classroom with a

strong foundation in employing the 6-Traits concepts— ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions—in their talk about their own and their peers’ writing.

Peer response groups are an essential part of the writing curriculum in this course. Students participate in groups of three or four. Regarding the organization of the response groups, students have some say in their group membership: before groups are formed, students submit to me, the teacher, the names of several students with whom they work well and the names of any students with whom they do not work effectively. I establish the groups, honoring, in every case, the “not-work-well” list and making an attempt to ensure that at least one student on the “work-well-with” list ends up in each individual’s group. I typically also work to see that each group has both males and females. With this particular group of students, this was not possible in every case because the group is comprised of 20 females and only four males. Although the numbers forced some all female groups, fortunately, all 24 students volunteered to be a part of the study.

Response groups in this classroom do not take on the “writing-without-teachers-look” that Elbow (1973) advocates. Rather these students participate in a structured form of peer response, which focuses on the 6-Traits assessment methods that their school employs. Students give each other two different types of response, written and oral. Once groups are established, a great deal of time in class is focused on learning what effective written and verbal peer response looks like and practicing as responders. Some of this is taught through direct instruction. I teach the students, for example, that effective response is very specific in nature, points back to the writer’s own words and ideas, and makes

detailed suggestions for improvement. After teaching these concepts, I then provide several models of effective response, using both response that I have created and response that former students generated in earlier peer response group work. After that, students practice giving response. This is done by projecting sample papers with the computer projector, which the students can then collaboratively respond to. The class generates a couple of collective responses before students are asked to practice their own responses on sample papers as homework. These homework responses are then shared in class the next day, as volunteer responders are able to participate in a fishbowl verbal peer response session. Teaching students how to respond in writing and verbally is an important part of the curriculum in this course.

Once students have learned what effective response looks like and have practiced responding, the actual process for their peer group response in the classroom is as follows: Students write and bring to class the first drafts of their papers. Their response groups get together and students exchange papers. They go home that night and complete response sheets for two of their group mates. These response sheets are designed largely around the 6-Traits method (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Students will, therefore, be asked to respond to topics like the following: the clarity of their peers' ideas, the logic and clarity of the organization, the effectiveness of the word choice, and the power of the voice. The response sheets are treated as homework assignments and are evaluated based on the responders' ability to read their peers' essays critically, provide specific feedback and offer detailed suggestions for improvement. When students come back the next day, the completed response sheets serve as a guide to the group's peer response session. The

students, then, have the class period (49 minutes) to talk about each others' writing. At this point, students have the autonomy to decide how this session will run. They simply know that they can use the response ideas that they generated the night before to guide the content of the discussion.

Each writing assignment takes place over a period of two-and-a-half weeks, from brainstorming through the final draft. For the purpose of this research, this period of time was called a "cycle." Each cycle begins with the study of professional and student essays in the relevant mode of writing. For example, during the cause and effect unit, the class read four or five essays which used cause and effect as a central developmental mode. After reading and analyzing these essays, students began to design their own writing projects. The peer response groups met for two days during each cycle.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the third and fourth cycles of the course. This was in October and November, 2010 and included the cause/effect and argumentative essays. This timing allowed the students to have already worked through two different writing cycles, the division and classification essay and the comparison/contrast essay. Students, therefore, had the previous experience of working in peer response groups on these first two projects. By the third writing cycle, the groups had familiarity with both the group, the group process, and with meaningful response to peers.

All participating groups were audio taped. Each group was given a tape recorder, which the groups operated themselves. As teachers who use groups know, having eight-to-ten groups in one classroom can be difficult because groups are not able to have the

privacy that they usually desire. As is commonly practiced in this school, during response sessions, students had the opportunity to work in three areas that I can easily oversee: the classroom, the hallway outside the classroom, and the auditorium across from the classroom.

As described previously, students also completed peer response sheets as they prepared for the oral peer response sessions. These sheets, along with the first drafts and final drafts of the writing assignments, were utilized as data.

In review, then, the student data consisted of the following:

- the audio recordings from each group during each cycle.
- the written response sheets (two per responder, per cycle)
- the first drafts of each essay (one per writer, per cycle)
- the finished drafts of each essay (one per writer, per cycle)
- the process journal entries (one per writer, per cycle)
- follow-up interviews conducted with participants after the process journal entries were completed (The intention was to interview all participants; however, six students were absent when the interviews were conducted, so there were 18 students who were interviewed).

I also maintained a notebook of field notes in which I recorded a chronicle of daily events during the two cycles. This notebook allowed me to record how each response session went, noting, for example, any interruptions that may have occurred in the school setting during the response periods. The field notes included comments about the process and informal observations of the groups' talk. The field notes were

supplemental and intended to provide a record of context for the analysis of data in December.

Data Analysis

An integrated ethnographic and sociolinguistic approach was the analytical framework for data analysis. As noted previously, this approach aligns effectively with the theoretical framework established in Chapter 2, in particular with intertextuality and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1986) and the sociocultural nature of dialogue and thought (Vygotsky, 1986).

Drawing upon Hymes (1972), each cycle of writing in the class consisted of definable sets of related activities or “speech situations.” In the AP / College-in-the-Schools Composition I course, the speech situation of focus consisted of the following process components: students writing drafts, completing the peer response sheets, discussing their writing, revising their essays, and reflecting on the process in their journal entries. This sequence was followed in each cycle. Within the speech situations of focus, analysis included identification of speech events, which were the unit of analysis in this study. Speech events are the largest unit for which one can identify linguistic structure (Coulthard, 1985). A speech event, for the purpose of this study, was defined as talk that is thematically cohesive, represents a single span of time, and can be summarized with a single summary statement. Speech events were identified based on units of discussion that were thematically related. In other words, in individual speech events students were discussing one common idea. Within a speech situation, speech events can occur successively or even simultaneously.

Sociolinguistic analysis is the study of discourse in context. Guided by the integrated framework, analysis in this study emphasized how talk and text are involved in the production of participants' social worlds and the knowledge and meanings constructed in and through their discourse. The construction of our social world happens in both micro- and macrospheres. Dewey (1916), in *Democracy and Education*, suggests that the microsphere—our interactions within family, groups, classrooms, and community—parallels the macrosphere, that is, our human institutions and sociocultural dynamics. Accordingly, what happens in small group settings can have broader sociocultural implications. In this current study, it was the peer response groups engaged in the speech situations that was the context of the study.

As a reminder, the research question asked what happens in the students' discourse within peer response groups in relation to the revision of student writing. Given the nature of the research question, within this integrated ethnographic and sociolinguistic analytical framework, a grounded theory approach to data analysis was adapted. Within the approach taken, hypotheses and a priori constructs were held aside in order to identify the emergent and constructed qualities of discourse within the group context. Consequently, central to this approach was bracketing (Denzin, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Gearing, 2004) of the sociocultural elements within the student interactions (e.g. presupposing information about group members' social identities). Bracketing included putting aside assumptions and a priori definitions in order to see the phenomena in and through the data. The purpose was to “make the familiar strange,” that is, to view what might be familiar interaction from an open perspective. Without presupposing theories in

the analysis process, it was in and through the student discourse that dynamics and functions of that student discourse emerged. Later, in the analysis and discussion of the data, the “reintegration” (Gearing, 2004) of the bracketed definitions, constructs, and hypotheses occurred. Gearing (2004) explains this as “the unbracketing and subsequent reinvestment of the bracketed data into the larger investigation” (p. 1434). Within the grounded theory approach to data analysis, I applied the constant comparative method to both the written and spoken texts of students’ speech situations (Bakhtin, 1986), whereby the data was analyzed concurrently in order to search for patterns and themes in the students’ discourse.

As presented earlier in the paper, in group talk, the talk itself functions in multiple ways (Cragan, Kasch, & Shields, 2009). On a social level, people in groups are always negotiating human relationships in what they do and in who they are as a group, creating what can be called a conversational workspace. There is social talk, and there is task talk, that is, talk directly related to the assigned task. The analysis of the data focused on the task talk and was completed in layers:

1. The first layer included an analysis of speech situations across groups to catalogue discussion topics, level of engagement with the task, and to identify occurrences of focused and sustained discussion of the writing task. This helped me to identify and select a group or groups for close analysis of the peer discussion. This analysis included the identification of the speech events to be studied.

2. The second layer focused on selected group speech events (Coulthard, 1985), which were transcribed for analysis to identify discursive dynamics and functions of student talk.
3. The third layer was a close analysis of identified speech events in relation to students' writing. I first examined the students' peer response sheets; then I studied the transcripts of the speech events. Next, I examined the revisions that the students made as a result of these interactions from the first draft to the final draft of the essays. Finally, I was able to study the process journal reflections that students wrote after they had completed the entire writing and response process and the follow-up interview transcripts that were conducted after the process journals were written. The purpose of this analysis was to identify the intertextual dynamics and functions between speech events and the revisions in the student writing. In the third layer of analysis, unbracketing (Gear, 2004) occurred to draw upon theoretical constructs from across sociolinguistics, group communication, and literacy, to name and describe the emergent dynamics within and across speech events.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis

Positive Voices

As I began studying the data of my students' experiences in their peer response groups, one thing was very clear: my students valued the response that their peers gave them, and they used that response in their revision process. This value was discussed again and again in the students' process journal responses they wrote at the end of each writing/response cycle. Emma shared her thoughts about this valuable process as she wrote,

My peer response group continues to function well and is even improving. We are now extremely familiar with one another's style of writing, as well as comfortable enough around each other to give and accept criticism. The responses that I received are always honest, detailed, and valuable to my revision process For example, I struggled with keeping a consistent thesis in my first draft of this paper. . . I received feedback saying that I should overtly state my thesis in my introduction, in order to leave readers with no questions about the point I am making. . . .

Emma went on to write that she took this feedback to heart and eliminated pieces of her introduction and added other sentences that clarified that her essay would focus on the concept of chivalry. Clearly, Emma placed great value on the feedback that her peers gave to her. She concluded her process response journal by writing,

I feel everyone in my group genuinely cares about the improvement of the other members, which results in very thought-out responses and effective discussion. . .

After experiencing the value of my writing group, I wouldn't feel comfortable handing in a paper without having people I trust evaluate it first.

Emma's voice was not alone. Student after student wrote about the importance of the peer response in their revision process. Nikki emphasized the high quality of the response she received,

As always, our group continues to function well together, giving positive feedback that is helpful and intelligent. We work well together and there isn't anything I would change. The response they gave me was useful and encouraging, as I often come in with a sub-par rough draft and poor self-esteem, and without it, my paper would be leagues behind what it is today.

Like Emma, Nikki noted how well her group gets along and how the response helped her build confidence in a draft that she believed was inadequate in its initial form.

Becca agreed with Nikki and wrote about how her peers' feedback forced her to examine new perspectives, which she believed strengthened the overall quality of her writing,

I feel like the peer response groups help my paper a lot because a lot of times I can write biased papers and my group members help me see when I am being biased and when I need to input more information from the other side of the argument.

Julia brought in another idea that students are frequently concerned with—their grades. In her opinion, the peer response she received was directly related to higher grades that she earned on these writing projects:

My peer responses were awesome. They totally dissected my essay and informed me of where my essay needs work and what needs to be fixed. It was definitely on a scale of 1 to 10 of helpfulness, a 10. Without them I wouldn't have gotten the grades I have so far.

Susan wrote about how her group not only diagnosed shortcomings in her writing but how they were always able to provide workable solutions to fix those problems:

Our group is functioning very well. We give effective responses and don't hold back. If we have an issue with part of a paper, we will definitely tell each other. Overall, the response I receive from my peers is very helpful. It is usually directly pointed at an issue and if I'm confused on how to fix a problem, my group mates always have workable solutions. . . . On talk days, we use almost the whole hour and I feel as if my paper is always strengthened with a large amount of help from my group mates.

Without a doubt, something happened in the peer response process that students found great value in. It is time now to examine what it was that students said and wrote to each other in greater detail.

The Data and the Process

The research question that guided this study is "What happens in the students' discourse within peer writing groups in relation to the revision of student writing?" In particular, the study examined what students say and write to each other in response to their peers' writing and the relation of that discourse to the revision process. As a starting point, a close examination of the students' peer response sheets and of the transcripts of

their oral response sessions revealed what it is that students were actually writing and saying to each other. To uncover how students were actually using that response in the revision process, it was necessary to examine which feedback students chose to use in their revisions and which feedback they chose to ignore. A careful study of their first drafts in relation to their final drafts revealed the significant extent to which these students used their peers' response in order to revise and improve the content of their papers. Beyond that, however, the study also focused on understanding why the writers made the revision choices they did. What were their reasons for using some feedback in the revision process and ignoring other feedback? The students' process journals, written after the entire writing/response sequence was complete, along with follow-up interviews, provided these data.

This chapter will focus on the following ideas:

1. How speech events were identified for analysis.
2. The nature of the student talk.
3. The use of the response sheet template.
4. How the conversational floor was established within the response groups.
5. How discourse moves emerged within the students' response.
6. Discourse patterns that emerged across students' texts.
7. Additional themes from student reflection.

Identifying Speech Events

The first level of analysis involved a close listening of the students' response sessions in order to identify speech events (Hymes, 1974). A speech event, for the purpose of this study, is defined as talk that is thematically cohesive, represents a single span of time, and can be summarized with a single summary statement. Speech events were identified based on units of discussion that were thematically related. In other words, in individual speech events students were discussing one common idea. For example, in each response session, every group spent focused time talking about the clarity or lack of clarity of the writer's thesis idea. In some instances, this talk was as simple as, "Your thesis idea is very clear. You are arguing that it is essential that we, as Americans, value the learning of foreign languages. Nice job." In other cases, the talk about the thesis idea led to a ten-minute discussion about the lack of clarity in the thesis, and the group made suggestions to the writer about what they believed the thesis should be. Whether it was a short, couple of sentences, as in the foreign language example above, or a longer discussion, each of these exchanges functioned as a speech event. Similarly, groups had speech events that were focused on the writers' organization in the essay, the essay's clarity of ideas, the effectiveness of the writer's supporting ideas, and so on. This initial examination of these speech events allowed me my first glimpse into what it was that students were saying and writing to each other.

Focused Task Talk

One of the first observations made about the sixteen peer response sessions is that the students were, in large part, focused on the curricular task of responding to their

peers. Although it was not unusual to hear occasional off-task comments, the vast majority of the time in the response sessions is spent on task talk (Cragun, Kasch, and Shields, 2009). All of the groups were functioning in a way that teachers would consider to be high-level response, both in regard to the focus and depth of student discussions. The peer response sessions were very focused on important rhetorical topics, and students were probing at a deep level into what their peers had written. This observation of focused task talk is consistent with what Gere and Abbott (1985) found in their studies: although teachers who use peer response groups are frequently concerned about students being off-task during response sessions, the majority of students do, in fact, stay on task. It is apparent from the response sessions that the students in this study were very serious about the task-at-hand. This seriousness was reflected in their written peer response and in the verbal response that they gave to their peers. What was observed in these groups was the kind of focused task talk that teachers who use peer response hope for.

There may be a few potential reasons for this success. A first factor is the make-up of the student population in the class. In order to be admitted into this course, students need to be in the top 25% of their class academically, or, minimally, they need to perform well on an entrance essay. Furthermore, once accepted into the class, students also need to complete a summer reading assignment as a part of the course curriculum during the summer previous to this school year. It is certainly not every high school student that wants to commit to this amount of work. Consequently, students who enroll in this course, historically, have placed high value on their academics. This academic commitment was reflected in the response that they gave to their peers.

In addition, students started the year in this course learning how to give helpful response. Previous to the data collection, the students also had completed two sequences of writing and response, which were not a part of this study but which were a part of the course curriculum. Finally, it is important to note that students are graded on their peer response. In this course, peer response, in addition to providing feedback to student writers, functions as a formative assessment that gives responders the opportunity to show that they can read the writing of other students critically and that they are able to identify strengths and weaknesses in that writing. With all of these considerations in mind, it was not surprising, therefore, that in the response sessions included in this study, students had a clear understanding of what they needed to accomplish, and the data reveal that they were willing to engage in this task.

Response Sheet Template

A process pattern that emerged in the student talk was that peer groups relied almost exclusively on the peer response sheets as a template for their discussions. The peer response sheets prompted students to focus their discussion on several qualities of writing that were emphasized in the course curriculum: 1) the 6-Traits of writing (ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions), which function as a framework for writing and discussion of writing in this course, and 2) rhetorical methods that were specific to the mode in which students were writing (e.g. Does the writer avoid the use of logical fallacies in the argumentative essay? Can the responder see how cause and/or effect are being used in the cause/effect essay?) (See Appendices A and B for copies of the peer response sheets that were used in these assignments).

As a part of the response process, students first read their peers' papers and responded in writing using a peer response sheet provided for them. After these response sheets were completed, students then had one forty-nine-minute class session to share their response within their peer response groups. The students understood that they had the autonomy to decide what formats their discussion sessions would follow; they were not obligated to follow the peer response sheets, which only served as a framework that outlined the rhetorical concepts that should be discussed. For example, students knew that a clear thesis idea is essential in the kind of academic writing they were doing in class. One of the response sheet items, therefore, asked students to respond to the clarity of the writer's thesis idea. Another response sheet item asked responders to comment on the effectiveness of the writer's support for his/her ideas.

Because the responders had these completed sheets in their hands during the oral response sessions, most groups chose to use the framework of those sheets as their outlines for conducting their peer response sessions. Students took ownership of the curriculum as a means to organize their discussions, share ideas with one another, and, in the process, they made the curriculum their own. The groups had ownership and authority over their group discourse. What this meant in specific terms was that most groups first discussed the writer's lead, the first item on the peer response sheet. Did the lead grab the reader's interest? How might the lead be strengthened? From there, groups typically moved to the second point on the written response sheet: the thesis idea. Was the thesis idea clearly stated? If not, what did the reader suggest in order to clarify the thesis idea? This process can be seen as Group 8 begins their response of Emma's paper

1 **Nikki:** Lead. Nice. It's long though.

2 **Emma** - They always are long.

3 **Nikki** - If there is a way you can make it shorter or something.

4 **Emma** - Yeah, I probably could.

5 **Alex** - I said, to be honest, your thesis is not as clear as it could be.

6 **Nikki** - No, I think you were like battling between two kinds of theses this
time.

7 **Emma** - I was.

8 **Alex** - Although much good has come of the changes, chivalry should not
9 be compromised.

10 **Nikki** - Yeah, something like that and then men and women are different.
11 We shouldn't erase their differences, but they should be credited and
12 respected. I think you are battling between those two.

13 **Emma** - Yeah, I know. Which should it be?

14 **Nikki** - I think you are talking about chivalry. I think you should keep it
15 on chivalry, the rest of the paper. Like, you see, I heard it in the
16 beginning, the one about the men and women thing, and then a little bit in
17 the end, and then nowhere else. And the chivalry was overpowering. You
18 can mention that, maybe more specifically, what you were saying before,
19 but keep it the thesis on chivalry.

In this excerpt, Alex and Nikki begin by responding to Emma's lead and then move seamlessly to their comments that her thesis statement was not clear. From there, a rich

discussion develops about which of the two topic angles she should pursue in her thesis statement.

Whatever the motivation, every group followed the general process that Group 8 lays out here with the broad ideas of the response sheet to guide their discussions. In following the response sheet outline, students were sharing ideas that were thematically related. The conversation first focuses on the lead, then the thesis, then the opposing viewpoints, and so on, as laid out in the specific peer response sheets for that given assignment.

Establishing the Conversational Floor

Although most of the response was thematically connected based on the guide of the response sheets, key differences were found in the processes that individual groups used to share their feedback. Each of the groups had a process for establishing the “conversational floor,” which Edelsky (1981) defines as “the acknowledged what’s-going-on within a psychological time/space” (p. 405). According to Edelsky, the floor can be the development of a topic or a function (e.g. asking a peer for a response) or it can be a combination of both. It can be developed by one person or by multiple people. In general, however, participants are able to identify the floor by summarizing the central idea of the conversation, as in the following examples: “Oh we are talking about his thesis idea,” or “We are responding to her use of detail in her support paragraphs.”

It should be noted that in this study there was a unique difference in the establishment of floor compared with what teachers frequently find when their students work in peer group settings. For teachers who use peer group work in the classroom, it is

not unusual that after directions have been given, students will typically begin their group work with comments like, “Okay, now what are we supposed to do?” or “I missed it; what are we doing?” This phase of the talk, which Cragan, Kasch, and Shields (2009) refer to as the orientation stage of group discussion, helps students to create the conversational floor. The group orients itself to the task and reframes the assigned task as the group’s task. In making these kinds of comments, then, students are taking ownership of the assignment and, once they have done this, they will usually get on with the task.

In this study, however, in all 16 peer response sessions, there was never even a single example of orientation talk. The evidence suggests that the peer response forms, which the students had completed the night before the response sessions, actually worked to establish the conversational floor. Having completed these forms, the students came to the discussion with a very clear sense of what they needed to say. There was no hesitation at the beginning of any session. Students jumped right in by talking about the essay leads, which was the first response item on each peer response sheet. They did not appear to go through an orientation to the task stage.

In addition to the peer response sheets, another reason for this lack of orientation talk is that at the time that the study was conducted, these students had already experienced the entire writing and response process in two other writing sequences. Students had already completed the division/classification and the comparison/contrast essays. In each of these writing projects, the students followed the same process: they read sample essays, generated their own ideas, wrote their first drafts, provided feedback on response sheets, shared response ideas verbally, revised their first drafts, and reflected

on the writing/response process. Consequently, students knew the process well through prior experience in the course. There was no need to orient themselves to the task as they began their group talk.

Although each group started their response sessions by beginning with the first response item on the peer response sheets, the groups did not follow one process for sharing their response ideas with their peers. Rather, the groups continued development of the conversational floor using different processes. In some groups, one speaker spoke at a time, and in other groups, multiple speakers shared ideas in conversation that was frequently overlapping.

The one-speaker-at-a-time process. In two of the groups, a one-student-speaks-at-a-time process emerged, which Edelsky (1981) defines as the F1 conversational floor. Edelsky notes that in this F1 floor, a clear pattern of turn-taking emerges, one individual speaking first, followed by the next group member, and so on. This pattern of turn-taking is exactly what happened in two of the groups: the first responder spoke, and the writer and other responder listened. Then the second responder spoke, with the other two listening. One of these groups, Group 1, was forced into this process because they lost a group member, who dropped out of the class after the groups were formed. Consequently, there were only two members in that group. The talk in Group 5, however, emerged in this turn-taking pattern. In this group, for the most part, only one person spoke at a time until that person had shared all of her response. At that point, the next person spoke. Occasionally, the writer offered a clarification of an idea or simply agreed with a statement by saying, “yeah” or “okay.” For them, the response was more presentational

than interactive. This can be seen in the following excerpt of Lisa responding to Beth's paper about the importance of learning world languages:

1 **Lisa** - I love your lead, even though I did not understand it, but one thing I
2 would do is that "Do you have any idea what I just said?"[sentence]. Then
3 you never tell us.

4 **Beth** - Oh, that's what basically all this is.

5 **Lisa** - Oh, yeah cause then if you don't have what it is in the intro,
6 something you could do is to put it in the conclusion. That way people will
7 continue to read so that, if they want to know what you said in that foreign
8 language at the beginning, they have to read to the end to find it out. Um,
9 your thesis is very blatantly clear—more Americans should learn a
10 foreign language, right there, very obvious. For your opposing viewpoint,
11 I wasn't, I am guessing that it was that Americans don't think they should
12 learn another language because they think the rest of the world should
13 learn English

14 **Beth** - Yeah.

15 **Lisa** - Okay, I wasn't sure because it felt kind of hidden. You can try to
16 make that a little more obvious and highlight that a little more. Um, your
17 organization was very good. Your intro paragraph set us up nicely for the
18 essay, and you give us some clear examples. Then your conclusion
19 finalized it very nicely for us, and, um, you supported all of your ideas
20 very well when you talked about job opportunities for learning a foreign

21 language you give the example of the one guy who learned Japanese and
22 now he is working for Toyota, so that was a good way to support that.
23 And then you give examples of how you can understand culture through
24 learning a language, so you did a good job of supporting all of it with
25 examples. I think it was a really good paper. I don't have any real
26 suggestions other than clearing up your opposing viewpoint.
27 **Beth** - Okay, yeah.

Lisa did not understand Beth's opening lines because, to grab the readers' attention, Beth wrote those lines in several foreign languages. In this example, other than a couple of quick responses from Beth for clarification, Lisa took the conversational floor, and her talk was guided strictly by the components of the peer response worksheet: the paper opener, the thesis idea, the opposing viewpoint, organization, and support. She was applying the curriculum and activity expectations in that she gave feedback, at least in one example here, that was very specific. It should be noted that one of the response strategies that students employed in their sessions is pointing back specifically to the writer's words and ideas. Lisa did that here as she shared her own reaction to Beth's lead, the use of the foreign phrases. Believing that it can be even more effective than it was in this draft, Lisa recommended a rewording that would keep the reader engaged at even a higher level throughout the paper (lines 1-10).

Lisa followed a similar process when she responded to Connie's paper about how schools are stifling the creativity in kids. Although this excerpt included a little more

interaction between Lisa and her other group members than the last excerpt did, it still largely followed the one-speaker-at-a-time pattern:

1 **Lisa** - I would say your lead is very blunt; it is blunt and dry and doesn't
2 really captivate me, but that's okay. Though you could make it more
3 interesting and leading and drawing in; you have a very clear thesis.
4 That's a good part of your intro—today's education system discourages
5 creativity. Right there for us. But then, um, opposing viewpoint, you,
6 [long pause] I am blanking right now; I don't know how to say it. I think
7 what you are trying to say is that many people feel today's liberal arts
8 education is ideal and sufficient; is that your opposing viewpoint?

9 **Connie** - That it doesn't need to change, yeah.

10 **Lisa** - Okay. Um. But then I kind of feel like you skip around a bit. Your
11 opposing viewpoint is clear, however, it seems that you lose track of that
12 idea as you go on. You seem to go on and talk about how liberal arts
13 allows for students to choose from many different paths of learning,
14 which, to me seems like it would promote more creativity, not stifle it. If
15 you can choose from, to me, your opposing viewpoint paragraph just
16 seemed kind of scattered, and it seemed like you were necessarily, I don't
17 know, it just seemed kind of all over the place to me. You might want to
18 try to clear that up a little more.

19 **Connie** - Well, that's what liberal arts was meant to do, and it was created
20 800 years ago.

21 **Lisa** - Yeah.

22 **Connie** - It's not effective anyway.

23 **Lisa** - So your organization, I like your intro paragraph, it's very nice,
24 other than it could be more interesting, but it sets us up nicely for how
25 your essay is going to be, but then, when I actually get to the body
26 paragraphs, I was a little confused because in your intro you talk more
27 about how the education system is discouraging creativity, but then I
28 found that pretty much all you talked about throughout the paper was
29 standardized testing. A lot of

30 **Connie** - that is a huge part of the education system.

31 **Lisa** - Okay. Well, I don't know, I think, you want to talk about the
32 education system like the classes that are being offered versus like just the
33 testing. 'Cuz both of your body paragraphs are about standardized testing,
34 so I think you need to bring in some more examples.

35 **Connie** - Well, it affects both, like, this sentence is kind of about the
36 method of teaching, this one is about the material, and whichever, and it
37 affects both because standardized testing affects the methods in which
38 teachers are teaching to the test, and affects the material in which program
39 are being cut that cultivate creativity.

40 **Lisa** - Okay.

41 **Connie** - I agree. I'll clear it up.

42 **Lisa** - The other thing to do is change your thesis a little to include

43 standardized testing as a part of the education system, I guess

44 **Connie** - Yeah because it is.

45 **Lisa** - Hmmmm. Um. So basically with your support, that is what I was

46 Getting at with your organization too. [She reads from her response

47 sheet:] “You need to support your thesis a little better or change your

48 thesis to help, you know because, what you are talking about is good

49 content. I like that. It makes sense, but you just need to kind of clear up

50 your thesis a bit then.” Um, and I think because you are trying to talk

51 about creativity, maybe try to put a little more pizzazz into your intro or

52 conclusion.

53 **Connie** – Mmhmm.

54 **Lisa** - Um to show that creativity, you know, do something a little quirky

55 or fun, you know with it, to show that creativity.

56 **Beth** - Yeah, that was slightly ironic.

57 **Lisa** - You’re talking about creativity, but this is very blah-ish, it’s okay

58 though, it’ll get better.

59 **Beth** - It will.

60 **Lisa** - And, um, I do like your conclusion sentence; however, it kind of, it

61 ties in

62 with your, um, your last body paragraph, so I would try to set it off and

63 give it a whole paragraph to itself, and that will definitely make it much.

64 **Connie** - Good idea.

65 **Amanda** - I didn't find any faulty logic, what you have is good. You just
66 have to clear some stuff up.

As noted above, this conversation led the group to more interaction than their talk in the excerpt above; however, compared with the talk of the other six groups, it is clear that the talk of this group emerged from a conversational floor grounded in the formula of the peer response sheets. In the appropriation of the assignment and without direction or prompting from me, the talk of this group emerged with one person presenting her full response alone, with only occasional interjections by the writer or the other responder. Additionally, in both of the above excerpts, whether the person speaking mentioned the exact topic words or not (i.e. "lead," "thesis," "opposing viewpoint"), she followed the order of topics presented in the peer response worksheet. Because the students knew that these response topics were the rhetorical elements that I would be using to evaluate the papers, it appears that this was a logical way to share their response. The students were clearly meeting the requirements of the peer response assignment. For example, Lisa again pointed back very specifically to Connie's writing as she discussed the idea of standardized testing (lines 26-39). Lisa noted that this testing idea did not seem to be a unified support for the main thesis, which was that the current education system stifles creativity in students. Connie defended her approach by responding that testing is a big part of the education system and showed that she saw the connection between her ideas; however, when she said, "I agree. I'll clear it up," it is also apparent that Connie was cognizant of the fact that she had not made the connection of the two ideas clear to her readers. In Group 1 and Group 5, although the response ideas were frequently very rich,

as is evident in the two examples above, there were very few interactive qualities in the group talk. The talk was distinctly different in the discussions by the other six groups.

The multi-speaker approach. Talk in the other six groups emerged through a process that seemed to use the peer response sheets as a starting point only. They used the response sheets to orient themselves to the task but went well beyond the structure of the response sheets in their discussions. Building off of the basic ideas on the response sheets, these groups developed discussions that were both generative and synergistic (Baird and Weinberg, 1981). In these groups, spontaneity of ideas became the norm. Discussions were free-flowing, and these groups had a much greater tendency to launch into conversations with multiple speakers overlapping their talk and collaboratively building on the ideas of each other. Responders were not only validating the writers, but, through their verbal response, they were also validating the ideas of their fellow responders. In this response the students were showing an awareness of and respect for the social norms that had emerged within their groups. In these groups, students frequently made comments like, “I wrote that same thing” or “That’s exactly what I said.” These six groups were operating from what Edelsky (1981) defines as the F2 conversational floor, a discussion where two or more people participate either in a verbal “free-for-all” (p. 384) or where two or more people collaboratively build a discussion around one central idea, each person adding to the ideas of the others. Brice (2002) describes this as deliberative discourse, where the students navigate simultaneously both the social norms and the task talk within the group in a generative manner. An example of such a multi-speaker conversation is seen in the following excerpt, where Emily and

Ann respond to the lead in Susan’s essay, which focused on the importance of preserving the trees in the Rain Forest:

- 1 **Emily** - Your lead was very interesting. I was drawn in right away. The
2 only problem I had is that it was very long.
- 3 **Ann** - Yeah, it was very long.
- 4 **Susan** - My intros are always are always very long; I can’t help it.
- 5 **Ann** - It was really good; it was just so long.
- 6 **Emily** - And I suggested something to cut out—cut out from this
7 “gradually” sentence to here because you’re just talking about choking
8 more, you’re just talking about choking and how it like destroys the body
9 and then go into the rain forest; you don’t need to go into choking even
10 more.
- 11 **Ann** - Yeah, but I did like how you compared the two of them because
12 you did kind of the same thing, I thought that was pretty clever. I did
13 think that part was pretty cool.
- 14 **Emily** - It was very interesting; you just need to cut it down a little bit.
- 15 **Susan** - Okay.

This excerpt is a good example of some of the multi-speaker discussions that played out in the majority of the response groups. Emily introduced the topic of Susan’s lead (line 1). Immediately, Ann engaged in the discussion, agreeing with Emily that Susan’s opener is too long (line 3). Emily made a detailed recommendation for shortening the lead (lines 6-10). Having agreed earlier that it does need to be shortened, Ann then noted that

Susan's approach is "clever" and "cool" (lines 11-13). Susan agreed with the comments that her responders provided. This type of engaging interaction was typical of a number of groups.

A similar generative discussion can be seen in the following excerpt, where Becca and Will provided feedback to Jordan on her argumentative essay, which focused on what, in Jordan's opinion, is the ridiculous nature of celebrating the Easter Bunny as an Easter tradition:

1 **Becca** - I think your lead was interesting because you gave the origin of
2 where the Easter Bunny came from, um, but like I also kind of wonder,
3 "what's the point" of the subject. And I think you should also introduce
4 your arguments against it or for it, or whatever.

5 **Will** - I don't know how you are going to do that though 'cuz most of the
6 arguments are for.

7 **Becca** - Yeah, that's what I kind of wondered too.

8 **Jordan** - It was mostly that it wasn't logical. That's about it.

9 **Becca** - Okay.

10 **Will** - Maybe instead of having it matter-of-fact, like, so it seems like you
11 could try to make it more funny, poke fun at the Easter Bunny or
12 something.

13 **Becca** - Yeah, that would probably give it a better tone. It's not really a
14 serious subject so you could just be making fun of it. Thesis is clear. You
15 think that the idea of the Easter Bunny is really irrational and stupid. You

16 could explain a little better why it matters, and it's a stupid idea and why it
17 matters, like kids don't like

18 **Jordan** - I know what you're saying.

19 **Will** - Isn't Easter a Christian holiday though?

20 **Jordan** - No.

21 **Will** - Yeah it is.

22 **Jordan** - Technically, but the Easter Bunny doesn't have anything to do
23 with Jesus.

24 **Becca** - Well, yeah.

25 **Jordan** - Easter was actually

26 **Will** - is a pagan holiday too

27 **Jordan** - celebrated in pre-
28 Christianity times like by Egyptians and stuff. It's on their like pyramids
29 and stuff.

30 **Becca** - Yeah cause I always wondered what the Easter Bunny had to do
31 with

32 **Jordan** - It has nothing to do with it.

This excerpt provides another example of a discussion that brings each group member's voice to the floor. Becca began the discussion by pointing back to Jordan's essay opener, expressing a concern that her topic did not really have an important purpose (lines 1-4). Jordan clarified her purpose by stating to the responders that she was focusing on the idea that the Easter Bunny simply is not logical. Will suggested that Jordan change the tone of

her essay to something that might poke fun at the tradition of the Easter Bunny (lines 10-12). Immediately, Becca agreed, noting that this might give the essay a clearer sense of purpose (lines 13-17). Will moved the discussion by suggesting that Easter is a Christian holiday. Jordan initially answered, “no,” but then asserted that the Easter Bunny has no link to Christian traditions and was celebrated in pre-Christian times. Like many other discussions in the study, this excerpt draws on ideas from all group members, who frequently overlap their conversation, building on each others’ ideas.

Drawing from the earlier works of Cattell, Baird and Weinberg (1981) discuss the importance of synergy in group function. They define synergy as “the total amount of energy available to the group for group activities” (p. 7). They note that synergy is used for two purposes within groups: group maintenance and action. A certain amount of energy is needed just to keep groups together. When groups get along well, little group energy needs to be spent on maintenance, and more energy can be spent on group action.

As these eight groups were observed, it was clear that students within both the F1 and the F2 groups got along well with each other. It is important to remember that, before groups were formed, all students in class created a list of people with whom they worked well and of students with whom they could not work well. In every case, the “not-work-well” list was respected. In other words, students were not placed in a group with peers whom they said they did not get along with. Likewise, in each case, I was able to make sure that at least one person on the “work-well-with” list ended up in each person’s group. This student input into their group formation appeared to have had a positive result in how the groups functioned. I saw this very clearly in the body language of the

group members as they worked. For the most part, these were friends working with friends. Additionally, in their process journals, many of the students commented on the strong rapport within their groups and noted that this led to valuable response. (This idea of rapport will be addressed to a great extent later in this chapter.) It was not surprising, then, to see most of the energy within the group be put toward the group action, the response itself, not group maintenance.

Recognizing that all of the eight groups appeared to have good rapport and were, consequently, able to focus on the task talk, there was still a difference in the amount of energy that came out of the discussions in the various groups. The simple fact was that the groups whose discussion emerged from the multi-speaker pattern had a synergy in their talk that was not apparent in the one-speaker-at-a-time groups. These multi-speaker groups frequently had overlapping talk that would consistently build in energy. The ideas in these groups typically grew in a generative manner, leading to very rich response. In these energetic moments, the students were most engaged and the peer response was most detailed. Because this energy led to rich response, the rest of this chapter will focus on speech events that exemplified this synergistic and generative discourse.

Examining Group Discourse through a Magnifying Glass

Having completed a first level of analysis with the speech events, the next step is to zoom in on the actual discourse within the response groups. What is it that students are actually saying and writing to each other? In what follows, a close analysis of the response group talk reveals specifically what students say to each other and how that discourse functions.

Discourse Moves

Examining the student talk through a magnifying glass, it became apparent that the students' response ideas were taking form through a number of discourse moves. The discourse moves were forms of response language whose purpose was to provide feedback to peers that would help them improve their writing through the revision process. Each of the discourse moves functioned as a means to move the authors' thinking about their writing. In some cases, these moves simply confirmed what was working well within the writing. This can be seen in the many moments where responders offered praise to the writer. In other cases, the discourse moves challenged the authors to clarify ideas or consider new perspectives. Expressing confusion about the writing or asking questions for clarification were examples of these kinds of discourse moves. The next section of the paper focuses on a close examination of several of these discourse moves and their function in moving the authors' thinking.

Offering praise. In every one of the sixteen response sessions, students frequently began their response by praising the writer on some aspect of the topic that was being discussed. If they were discussing the writer's lead, it was usually initiated with some kind of positive comment about what the writer had done effectively in that rhetorical area. This praise functioned in a couple of different ways. First, it served as a genuine compliment to the writer. Students were praising their peers because they were genuinely impressed with aspects of the peer's writing. This is seen in many examples in the transcripts. Grace says to Lauren, "I thought your lead was very effective; it drew me in." Julia tells Kayla, "I couldn't find anything [wrong]. I'm serious, like I read it, and I

was like, this is cool.” Susan comments to Ann, “I said I really like your lead. It starts off your paper quite well and immediately gets your reader thinking about the topic.” Finally, Emma says to Alex, “Organization. I am so jealous of you. You always write so concisely. It turned out really well.” In these cases, students were very genuine in their responses and were, indeed, impressed with the writing of their peers.

There were other cases, however, where positive or somewhat positive statements were used to buffer negative feedback, or at least suggestions, that were to follow. In other words, these students might have felt obligated to say something with at least a positive overtone before they moved on to a less positive comment. For example, Lily tells Olivia, “Thesis is clear and effective. I said to restate it because everyone deserves to know who they are.” If the thesis is, in fact, clear, it probably does not need to be restated. Lauren takes a similar approach also with her comments to Grace: “I thought your first paragraph was good. It got me interested right away. The only thing I wasn’t sure about was your thesis. Like what you were for ‘cuz you kind of posed a question, but maybe if you answer it in the first paragraph, your thesis would be more clear and your intro would be stronger.” Grace responds to Ben by saying, “Your leading paragraph is strong. You do a good job of introducing us to the topic. I’d suggest that you make the first sentence even more motivating. That would make us want to read on, kind of.” In each of these cases, and in many more in the transcripts, positive initial comments made way for negative or constructively critical comments to follow.

Revoicing the author. Another discourse move that emerged frequently in the response sessions was the revoicing of the author’s words. This restating of the author

usually functioned as a means of clarifying ideas. In some cases, this clarification was then used to ask a question or to recommend a revision. As an example, Grace responded to Ben's thesis idea in his argumentative paper on America's education system:

1 **Grace** – I didn't really get your thesis in the first paragraph, but as I read
2 on, by the end, I had it. I think, if this is right, that the education system
3 needs to provide students with opportunities to succeed, kind of thing.

4 **Ben** – It was mostly, like, um, kind of changing a look at education
5 reforms, so it's like, I don't know, switching more like, putting people into
6 groups, and more separating them based on specialties.

In this excerpt, Grace revoiced Ben's statement to seek clarification from Ben. Ben then drew on Grace's restatement by clarifying what he saw his own thesis idea to be.

Group 4 revoiced Ann's ideas about whether or not morals should be taught in school, and, once the idea was clarified through the restating, Emily made a recommendation for improvement:

1 **Susan** - I said your thesis is really clear. It makes a really strong essay.
2 It's pretty obvious that your thesis is that moral standards should not be
3 taught in the classroom. It's pretty much like you slapped us in the face
4 with it. We get it.

5 **Emily** - That's what I put too, okay. I said you could make it even clearer,
6 like in your other paragraphs, like this is more for the ideas question, but
7 list specific moral standards that would be taught.

8 **Ann** - Okay.

9 **Emily** - ‘cuz I think that would really help you out.

Group 3 took a similar approach as Marie and Kayla restated Julia’s thesis idea focusing on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Kayla responded first with a simple restatement of Julia’s thesis. This led Marie into longer restatement as she pointed out that Julia actually had two central components to her thesis statement:

1 **Kayla** - I thought your thesis was really clear.

2 **Marie** - Yes, definitely, I got it right away.

3 **Kayla** - You restate it a lot of times throughout the essay, and I got it to be
4 for the overall good of Palestine citizens Israel should not construct
5 housing units and, instead, focus on peace with the Palestinians. The only
6 thing I suggested was kind of rewording it, to say, instead of saying, for
7 the overall good of Palestine, I said, for the overall good of both countries’
8 citizens. ‘Cuz the “its” is a little bit confusing.

9 **Marie** - I think your thesis has two different arguments in it. One of them
10 is that the peace deal should be the number one priority of both countries,
11 which, is kind of what you argue is it should be. But then the other one is
12 the construction itself whether or not it should happen, regardless of the
13 peace talks, and that is like a totally different very controversial issue in
14 itself because it is talking who actually owns East Jerusalem, and so I
15 don’t know if you could work into your thesis, maybe, say like, um, the
16 decision on whether or not to build should be postponed until the peace
17 talks have been settled. Otherwise, you are kind of taking on two

18 issues . . . and that requires a lot more argument.

19 **Julia** - Yeah that's a good point: I didn't even think about that.

20 **Kayla** - At the same time, I do think you tie them in fairly well. Like you
21 do make the connection that the reason why you do not want the housing
22 to be built is because it won't bring about peace, but it will also work if
23 you make the changes that [Marie] states to make it more specific, then a
24 lot of your paper will still work.

25 **Marie** - It would just be a little thing so you are not taking on the issue of
26 whether or not they have the right to do that.

The revoicing of Julia's thesis idea here led to a very rich conversation. Marie revoiced Julia's idea to point to the fact that Julia might, in fact, have taken on more in this thesis than she can handle effectively in a paper of this scope. The restatement then functioned to push Julia to reexamine the scope of the focus of her content.

Expressing confusion. Another discourse move that frequently emerged in their response sessions was expressing confusion about something that the writer had written. As with the revoicing described above, this discourse move appeared when students wanted to clarify the writer's ideas. This can be seen in multiple speech events. In a first excerpt, Lauren expressed her confusion about one aspect of Grace's argumentative essay:

1 **Lauren** - I got the reasons why he wouldn't want to sell his land. It was
2 kind of frustrating because there was a lot of miscommunication going on
3 between him and the school district. Yeah, I could understand that point.

4 Again, just make it more clear that that is the opposing viewpoint and not
5 yours because I got confused. I thought your opposing viewpoint was the
6 point you were actually arguing. I think that was just because of the
7 thesis; I didn't know which one you were supporting.

In this excerpt, Lauren expressed her confusion about Grace's opposing viewpoint, noting that she first thought that Grace was arguing for, not against, that viewpoint. She used her confusion as a means of having Grace clarify her intent in this regard.

In the following excerpt, Beth responded to the confusion that she experienced as she read Connie's essay on how our current educational system discourages creativity in students. In particular, she expressed confusion about Connie's organization:

1 **Beth** - Okay, your organization at times was a little bit confusing because
2 you would bring something up and then talk about it later, and then the
3 sentence, the last sentence in your third paragraph "not only are we
4 becoming less creative because of it, but we are losing our empathetic
5 nature that is inherent in all humans?"; I found that slightly confusing
6 because it is your last sentence and that is the only time that you mention
7 it. So if you want it in there, just try to support it or else just cut it.

In this statement, Beth's confusion functions to recommend a very specific revision that Beth believed would make Connie's support of her ideas stronger.

In a final excerpt, Nikki expressed confusion about the central idea of one of Alex's body paragraphs in his argumentative paper, focusing on the necessity of proper recovery time for concussion victims in sports:

1 **Nikki** - Overall, I think I was confused a little bit on the main idea of the
2 second paragraph.

3 **Alex** – Okay.

4 **Nikki** - Just because I think you are using it as the refutation type of thing

5 **Alex** - Yeah.

6 **Nikki** - Okay, I figured that out later on, and I was like, oh that's what it
7 was for. I get it. I don't know, it kind of /inaudible/. I think you can just
8 add more to the opposing viewpoint or something.

9 **Alex** - Okay.

In these excerpts, as in many others in the data, students' confusion functions to get clarification of the author's ideas. Once the clarification was made, responders were either satisfied with their understanding of the writing, or they occasionally moved to make a recommendation to the writer in an attempt to clarify the content even further.

Asking questions. Another discourse move that was used with regularity within the response groups was the asking of questions. These took two forms: First, responders asked questions of writers in order to gain a clearer understanding of the meaning of the text. Secondly, the writers themselves asked question of the responder in order to elicit feedback on specific questions the writers had about their own writing.

In the first excerpt, Sophia, as responder, asked a question of Grace about her thesis idea:

1 **Sophia** - Okay I have a question 'cuz I thought your thesis was that the
2 school district should not be able to use eminent domain, is that like the

3 same thing? Is that wrong?

4 **Grace** - No, but it's just 'cuz my thesis is not very clear, so I should make
5 it more clear.

6 **Sophia** - So what it is that . . .

7 **Grace** - Yeah I am arguing for the Red Plan. . . .

In this case, it is obvious that Sophia's question functions to clarify her understanding of Grace's central idea. In another excerpt, Beth asked Lisa a question about her thesis idea:

1 **Beth** - Your thesis was not stated the most clearly you could be so far. It
2 was hard to figure whether you were saying put a cap, or put a cap and
3 take that money and put it to good use.

4 **Lisa** - Mmhmm.

5 **Beth** - What is it?

6 **Lisa** - It just supposed to be that we would have a cap on them. I was just
7 trying to offer ideas or show why there should be a cap.

As in the previous excerpt, Beth asked her question in order to gain a complete understanding of Lisa's rhetorical intent, as articulated in her thesis idea.

In occasional cases, questions were asked by the authors themselves in order to direct the feedback they received. This can be seen in the following conversation, where Karen asks about the opposing viewpoint in her essay, which focuses on humane treatment of fish as house pets:

1 **James** - So maybe if you could put all of your opposing viewpoints into
2 one, it might clarify it.

3 **Karen** - Yeah. I was also wondering should I put in—because a lot of it is
4 just common knowledge, people think that it's okay for a beta [fish] to be
5 in a little tank—should I put that in there too?

6 **James** - Yeah, yeah, definitely put all of the opposing viewpoints you can
7 in.

8 **Karen** – Alright.

9 **James** - 'Cuz you, like, the stuff that you have isn't bad, but I could only
10 find three of them, so maybe if you could.

In this conversation, James offered feedback on Karen's opposing viewpoint idea. He asked her to combine several points she had made. It is clear that she had been thinking about this and asked a follow-up question of him about where she should place this idea.

As one final example, the following excerpt, Susan asked her group if she should add another idea to her essay on the use of wood from the rain forest:

1 **Susan** - As another refutal point I was considering using which people in
2 America use the rain forest wood as exotic furniture—do you think that
3 would be a good point?

4 **Ann** - Yeah because it has to do with furniture.

5 **Susan** - but I didn't know if that would make sense or not, and I think it
6 would help define the flaws because, besides cutting down the rain forest,
7 there is really no flaws in using it because the wood is so durable. It's
8 crazy how strong rain forest wood is. It's crazy because like, I don't want
9 you to cut down the rain forest just to have durable wood.

In this excerpt, Susan raised the question of how she can expand her opposing viewpoint idea in her essay. Her responder encouraged her to follow her instincts and add the point about using rain forest wood to make exotic furniture.

Bringing in the voices of others. In addition to navigating the conversations from personal experiences and shared classroom experiences, responders, in select moments, brought other non-group members to the conversational floor. This was an important discourse move in that it allowed other outside influences into the private discussion of the peer response groups. In particular, students occasionally brought my voice to the discussion, even though I was not physically present in the discussion. In given moments, students also brought the voice of the college that sponsors this College-in-the-Schools course to the floor. Some background context is necessary in order to explain this.

The course is a “College-in-the-Schools” course, which means that our high school offers this collegiate “freshman English” course on our campus. Participating students simultaneously receive college and high school credit for the course. The curriculum for such courses is prescribed by the college. In my case, as the teacher, I am given little flexibility in terms of the specific kinds of writing that my students do; they need to write in multiple academic modes (division and classification; comparison and contrast; cause and effect; argumentation, etc.). The sponsoring college oversees our program, and, as the teacher, I am required to submit to my college mentor each year, several samples of the students’ writing. This is how the college is assured that what is being taught in the multiple high school sites is, in fact, the college course curriculum.

Because of this process, the class spends a great deal of time discussing the specific course expectations, as prescribed by the college. With all of this in mind, it is not surprising to hear students making reference to these expectations. As a specific example, the sponsoring college has been adamant that students write very clear thesis statements in their academic essays. This requirement comes through in a discussion of the cause and effect essay, where Nikki made reference to her desire to have an implied thesis, rather than an overtly stated thesis. She wrote, “but I guess they don’t like that at the college.”

In the study of argumentative writing, the course curriculum emphasizes the value of acknowledging an opposing viewpoint as one method of establishing credibility as a writer. For strategic purposes in their argumentation, it is recommended that students not place the opposing viewpoint in the last position in the essay. In other words, it can be a big disadvantage to leave the reader with the opinion that a writer is *not* supporting. Rather it is recommended that the student place this opposing viewpoint earlier in the essay and then to use supporting paragraphs to refute that argument. This recommendation had a clear impact in the students’ peer response: Kayla told her peer, “The opposing viewpoint is at the end, and Mr. Witikko specifically said not to.” Amy’s response was similar: “your fourth paragraph is the opposing viewpoint and Mr. Witikko said don’t’ end on these.”

In addition to the voice of the curriculum being present in the discussion, Group 7 brought me to the floor in their discussion of Becca’s argumentative paper, which focused on negative aspects of beauty pageants. This discussion, however, focused on my

17 and stuff 'cuz it gives like the reader a sense of what a pageant is.
18 **Becca** – Yeah.
19 **Jordan** - And I like how you put your opposing viewpoint right
20 afterwards, that, um, children when they are put in them, they gain
21 confidence, well like comfort with being in front of an audience,
22 and I think that's like a big thing, but to strengthen that, cause you
23 have like being comfortable and that it looks impressive on a
24 resume and then you say something about like the money, and that
25 they are dedicated to it. I don't know if that really fits.
26 **Becca** - Okay.

From here the groups launched into a very rich discussion about the focus of Becca's essay. What is very interesting here is that my dual role as father and evaluator of this essay comes into play. Clearly, there is a concern expressed in the conversation that, because my daughter was going to be involved in a beauty pageant, I might take offense to any criticism of such pageants and, it seems implied, that this could be reflected in my evaluation of Becca's paper. (Ironically, this perception could not have been farther from the truth. The subsequent pageant was, in fact, the longest four hours of my life—four hours spent only because I love my daughter.) This response is an essential reminder of how multiple voices from outside of a group can have strong influence within the workings of a response group.

Directing revision suggestions. The discourse move that was employed with the greatest frequency within the peer response sessions was the responders directing specific

suggestions for the writer's revision process. Although all discourse moves are in some way making suggestions, these directions were much more specific in that they pointed to very particular pieces of text, and the responders urged the writers to make specific changes. In most cases, these suggestions functioned to strengthen the content of the written piece or to clarify an idea in the selection. In many cases, it was a suggestion to expand on content. This directing change can be seen in the following excerpt from Group 1's response session on the cause and effect papers. Lily responded to Olivia, encouraging her to expand her support paragraphs:

- 1 **Lily** – Maybe write an effect paragraph. You write about how it takes a toll on
- 2 your body.
- 3 **Olivia** – Yeah, I was confused on that.
- 4 **Lily** – Maybe add another separate paragraph like before you conclude about
- 5 just like the effects that mono has on your body. You're tired. You're sore.
- 6 **Olivia** – Good idea.

Here, Olivia was very receptive to Lily's suggestion that she expand on her support paragraphs.

In another conversation, Susan made a recommendation to Emily regarding the support paragraphs of her essay about the idea that zoos are not inhumane and actually help preserve animals:

- 1 **Susan** - Um, where the point loses some of its effectiveness is, um, I think
- 2 you should talk about where the animals who are in the breeding program
- 3 come from though.

- 4 **Emily** - I know. I was going to look for that.
- 5 **Susan** – Yeah.
- 6 **Emily** - like either the Houston Zoo website or the /inaudible/ Zoo
7 just to see where they get them from.
- 8 **Susan** - It’s pretty obvious they can’t just pull them off the street
9 somewhere, so I think your argument loses some validity because it seems
10 like you almost aren’t telling the whole truth.
- 11 **Emily** - Yeah.
- 12 **Susan** - Another suggestion I had but, it’s completely optional, would be
13 to address the animals’ diet while living in the zoo, like in the cheetah
14 section. Because, um, it’s like you can’t really recreate the way an animal
15 hunts in a zoo, so I thought that would be a helpful argument too, but only
16 if you wanted.
- 17 **Emily** - I was actually gonna put something in there because I was on the
18 Houston Zoo website, and that’s the zoo that did the track thing, and they
19 like throw in bones, like /inaudible/.
- 20 **Susan** - Yeah that would strengthen your argument a lot.

In this discussion, Susan made two suggestions for content improvement: first, she noted that it was important for Emily to let the reader know where the animals for the zoo breeding program come from (lines 1-3, 8-10). Susan asserted that if Emily did not include this, the reader might think that Emily was not telling the truth. The suggestion,

At the micro level, it was clear that students' language was emerging through these discourse moves, which were intended to push the writers to new ways of thinking about their writing. Whether it was expression of confusion, asking a question, paraphrasing the writer for clarification, or directing a specific revision, these moves were the essence of the peer response. In attempting to help their peers improve their writing, responders navigated what it was they wanted to say, and these discourse moves allowed them to convey their response in a meaningful and clear manner.

Patterns Across Texts

Thus far this chapter has focused on several important aspects of the students' talk in peer response groups. First, we have examined the processes that emerged within their peer response groups, including both how the students utilized the response sheet templates and how the students work together to establish the conversational floor. The emergence of floor was essential in not only how students shared their response ideas with each other but in what it was they actually said to each other. Secondly, I have presented a number of very specific discourse moves that emerged in their peer response sessions of the six multi-speaker, generative peer response groups. Although employed at different times and for different purposes within the 49-minute response sessions, each move that emerged functioned to provide feedback that helped the writers improve their papers.

The research question that guided this study asked what was happening in the student discourse within peer response groups and how that discourse was affecting the students' revision process. At this point, it is important to turn attention to what was

happening in the group work across the multiple texts. At the beginning of the response process, the students started with the peer response sheets, providing focused feedback on the writers' first drafts. From there, they moved to the discussions. After the discussions, students revised their essays. At the end of the revision process, students then reflected on the response process, writing a process journal where they highlighted what was most helpful and least helpful in the response process. In these journal entries, students also wrote about what peer feedback they chose to use during their revising and what they chose to ignore. They also discussed why they made these choices.

Another essential aspect of analysis needs to be examined: the response and revision process *across* student texts. What was happening in the students' thought and writing processes as they moved from written response to verbal response to revision and then to reflection? Careful examination across the student texts revealed a number of patterns in terms of how the peer response functioned in the revision process. It is this cross-text analysis that is presented next in this chapter.

The intertextual nature of group talk. Bakhtin (1986) clarifies a relationship that exists between the writers and readers and what they "say" to each other when he asserts that a text is an interwoven representation of numerous discussions, current and previous knowledge, and all experiences surrounding a given topic. Everything that is said or written is said or written in response to something that has come before it. These ideas build on one another in what becomes a collective articulation of the idea. The nature of group discourse is intertextual; students draw on multiple "texts" in talking about their writing. This generative process of conversation is reflected in the discourse

that students shared throughout the response process in this study. The degree to which the responders understood what the writers were trying to convey was dependent, first, on the clarity of the written ideas. Understanding was also dependent on the readers' own personal experiences with an idea. This individual knowledge could have come from firsthand experience in their personal lives, or it could also have come from shared educational experiences in the classroom. Simply put, students brought multiple "texts" to the floor in their peer response sessions. These texts affected both the discourse that is shared within the response process, and they affected the revisions that the writers made after receiving response from their peers. The idea that student discourse is intertextual can be seen in the speech event that follows.

Speech event 1. One of the most interactive groups in both response cycles (cause/effect and argumentation) was Group 4 (Susan, Ann, and Emily). This group was always on task and frequently participated in genuine, even enthusiastic, conversations about each topic at hand, marked with multiple interchanges involving all three group members. It was not unusual to hear this group raising their voices as they became genuinely engaged in the discussion.

In this first excerpt, Susan and Ann responded to the introduction of Emily's cause and effect paper, which deals with grieving the loss of loved ones. Emily wrote the following opener for the essay:

When someone you know dies, it doesn't matter if they were your friend, family member, or acquaintance, you must go through a grieving process. This process changes based on how well you know the person and if their death was

somewhat expected or not. Either way, everyone must mourn the loss of another life whether they knew them very well or not very much at all. Everyone mourns differently, so I can only speak for my own processes and those I have observed from my own family members.

In the peer response sheets that they wrote about Emily's essay, Susan and Ann pointed out their confusion about Emily's thesis statement. Susan wrote, "I assume your thesis is that a person's grieving process is dependent on how well they knew the person that died. At least that's what I get from your body paragraphs. Your intro and conclusion are more everyone grieves differently. Pick one and better define it in your intro and conclusion." Ann wrote that "I wasn't totally sure what your thesis was. I know your paper was on death/the loss of a loved one, but the thesis itself wasn't really stated in the intro. Maybe if you added it (about how people mourn according to how well they knew the person) in the intro it would help structure your paper."

In the following peer response session, Susan and Ann expanded their comments on Emily's opening paragraph and the confusion they had in deciphering what Emily's thesis idea was. Susan and Ann understood that a clear thesis idea was a requirement for this writing assignment, and, therefore, spent a significant amount of time talking about that with Emily:

- 1 **Susan** - For your thesis, I was a little confused. At first I assumed it was
- 2 like a person's grieving process is dependent on how well they knew the
- 3 person before they died, but then when I read your body paragraphs, I
- 4 thought it was more like—that's what I got from your body paragraphs,

5 but when I read your intro and conclusion, I thought it was more that
6 everyone grieves differently. But then at one point I thought it was both.
7 So make sure like you pick one, and define it in your intro and conclusion
8 and then carry that idea throughout your body paragraphs.

Susan started her analysis by focusing on Emily's text. However, her analysis did not just focus on Emily's words. Susan was holding Emily's words up against the text of classroom expectations. Built into Susan's language is her understanding that a clear thesis idea is essential to the success of this essay. That understanding, brought on through direct instruction in the course curriculum, functions as an additional text in this discussion.

Ann continued the discussion as she expressed her own confusion on what Emily's thesis is:

9 **Ann** – Yeah, and I didn't really—like it wasn't really stated in the opening
10 paragraphs. Like I mean, you said that everyone mourns differently, but it
11 wasn't really shown then throughout the thing because it was mostly about
12 how you grieved, and it was like how 'cuz if you knew them, you didn't
13 really grieve, and if you did know them it was sadder, but then like when
14 you said that, like you

15 **Emily** - Mmhmm.

16 **Ann** - were really just talking about kind of staying out of your mom's
17 way and like helping your mom and how like she was grieving, so maybe
18 if you

19 **Emily** - Well, my thesis was that —oh, sorry
20 **Ann** - oh, sorry, ‘cuz then maybe so
21 if you like stated your thesis clearly
22 ‘cuz you, you usually are really good at that in all of your papers, it’s just
23 like “bam,” like right there. So maybe if you did that, it would help
24 structure your paper a lot better.

Here Ann brought to the floor an additional text, Emily’s personal experience in trying to help her mother grieve. Emily was trying to make generalizations about grieving based on her own personal experiences with the loss of loved ones and the effect of that loss on her mother. Emily then attempted to clarify what her intent was in the essay:

25 **Emily** – And I don’t know, I think my thesis was everyone, like no matter
26 what, should try to grieve because that’s like healthy, and that will make
27 you feel better about it. How could I make that more clear?
28 **Susan** - I don’t think that is a good thesis for cause and effect because you
29 aren’t really showing cause and effect. I think a better thesis would be
30 **Ann** - like the cause of, like the effect it has on your family or on yourself
31 when someone dies.
32 **Susan** - Yeah, or like in each of your body paragraphs you talk
33 about, um, like whether you know the person was going to pass or not, or
34 whether it was sudden or which is like, that could be a good cause and
35 effect. You could say how knowing, like you could use, knowing if they

36 were going to pass or not, or if it was sudden, as a cause and the effect is
37 the type of grieving you experienced instead.

38 **Emily** – But then what would my thesis be? That’s what, I don’t know, I

39 **Susan** - Your thesis

40 could be that the way like, the way you find about someone’s death

41 changes the way you grieve them. Or something along those lines.

42 **Emily** - Okay. I just had a little trouble with that.

43 **Susan** - Yeah.

In this excerpt, Susan and Ann introduced two new texts. First, Susan clearly understood the requirement of this writing assignment in regard to using the cause and effect mode, and she brought that text to the table here (lines 28-29). Susan understood that one of the evaluation criteria for this assignment was that writers needed to employ cause and effect in a clear manner in their writing. Clarity of cause and effect was, in fact, one of the response questions on the peer response sheets for this assignment. The response sheets were an additional text that Susan and Ann had in their hands as this discussion developed. Then they brought the ideas to the floor in this discussion.

The intertextual nature of this talk is critical because it emerged similarly in the discussion that many of the groups had. The student conversation worked on several different levels because of the “texts” that each student brought to the conversational floor. First, Emily had her own personal experiences with the grief brought about by death; this functioned as one text. Emily’s written text about death also functioned as a “text.” Each of the other students in the response group also brought her own experiences

of death and grieving to the table as another text. Additionally, based on the work of about seven years of language arts classes, each of the students had an understanding of what a thesis idea is, or should be; this context functioned as an additional text. Furthermore, as noted above, these students brought the text of cause and effect writing to the floor. Their talk showed that they understood the characteristics of this type of academic writing. Add to this the fact that, previous to writing this assignment, students in this class read and analyzed five essays that used the cause and effect as a central rhetorical mode. Consequently, these students had seen multiple examples of cause and effect writing in action. These experiences also function as a text off of which these students based their response. This intertextual nature of the talk led to a rich discussion, which reached far beyond the scope of Emily's essay that is being discussed.

Based on the feedback that she received from her peers, Emily did make significant changes in this opening paragraph during the revision process. The final copy of her essay opens as follows:

Death causes great pain and heartache, no matter if the deceased was a close loved one or not. Sometimes, one can expect the death due to old age or bad health. On the other hand, some fatalities come out of nowhere and leave one with a sense of abandonment. Either way, one must deal with the death in order to find closure. I have experienced quite a bit of death in my life, and with every passing, my family has used different methods to move on.

It is clear that Emily listened to her peers' critique about the lack of clarity in her thesis idea. Her revision presented a version that is much more focused in its scope.

Whereas Susan and Ann expressed confusion about the focus of the thesis idea in the first draft, in this version they understood that Emily was focusing on the different coping methods her family has used in dealing with the loss of loved ones.

Emily found the response she received from her peers to be very valuable. In her process journal at the end of the project, Emily reflects both on the response process in general and on the response she received about her opening paragraph:

The feedback I received from my peer response groups was very helpful. I was struggling a lot with this paper because the topic was very personal, and I felt that I absolutely needed my group members to help me out. After hearing what they had to say about my paper, I felt more confident in being able to fix it. I need to have a peer response group because I know that something that makes sense to me doesn't always make sense to everyone else.

I used both of the suggestions about my thesis in my introduction because I was having trouble narrowing it down. I knew that I wanted to talk about how everyone must go through a grieving process, or else you could suffer psychologically, but I didn't know how to quite say it. I took [Susan's] advice by getting rid of talking about how the relationship correlates with how a person grieves, because my ideas weren't very clear.

Emily drew attention to a couple of essential elements about their group's response. First, she pointed to the fact that it was her group that helped her attain a needed distance in writing the paper; she noted that the topic was very personal, and she struggled with the perspective needed to convey her ideas clearly. She suggested that this

necessary vantage point came from her group members. Interestingly, once her group members voiced their confusion, Emily, as the writer, gained confidence in her ability to fix the issues. What she had not personally recognized because of her nearness to the topic she was able to define through the eyes of her peers. This clarification of the problem led to both a revision plan and the confidence to approach that revision.

Secondly, Emily recognized that her group's feedback helped her to find a needed focus for her thesis idea. It was Susan's actual wording and focus suggestion that helped Emily narrow her topic down.

In the analysis of speech events from a number of the multi-speaking, synergistic response groups, it was clear that multiple texts were brought to the floor in the peer response process. First were the physical texts that the students created for the course: the essay drafts and the peer response forms. As they were writing the peer response forms, the responders were drawing on other texts to generate ideas. For example, Ann and Susan drew on the course curriculum regarding the necessity of clear thesis ideas and of intentional use of the cause and effect mode. Their understanding of these expectations led them to respond to what they perceived to be deficiencies in Emily's writing in regard to her thesis idea and her use of cause and effect as a rhetorical method. The responders followed the framework of the response sheet to generate their ideas for the author. The written response provided a rehearsal of ideas that the responders later brought to the conversational floor in the verbal response sessions, and these written ideas shaped the flow and content of the discussion group. The response, however, went beyond the text of the peer response sheets. In the previous example, in addition to drawing on Emily's

personal experiences with grieving, as reflected in Emily's papers, Ann also drew on her own understanding of how other people sometimes grieve; she encourages Emily to incorporate in the essay how some people, when grieving, turn to others for help, other people get angry, still others turn to drinking and other unhealthy alternatives. Certainly, the texts functioned differently in the discussions of various groups. However, responders very clearly drew on multiple texts to convey their response ideas to the writers in the study.

Idea generation. The groups that engaged in multi-speaker, overlapping discourse had numerous incidents of very engaging discussions. Typically, these groups started with one idea taken from the peer response sheet but, unlike the two groups that functioned strictly from the response sheet, these synergistic groups used the response sheets as a starting point only. In studying the data, it was typical to see these students take one single idea and collaboratively add to that idea, frequently with energetic and overlapping discussion. In the end, these groups often used the power of the group to build that one idea into an entirely new text. The following excerpts will show this idea generation in action (Cragun, Kasch, and Shields, 2009).

Speech event 2. Group 4 (Susan, Emily, and Ann) provides an excellent example of the generative nature of group discourse when they discussed Susan's cause and effect essay on eating disorders. In particular, they focused their discussion on Susan's paragraph that deals with how women are portrayed in fashion magazines:

Magazines, on the other hand, though not nearly as destructive to girls, have their negative effects also. Any person can walk into the nearest

supermarket, Target, or doctor's office and find a tabloid bashing celebrities body shapes. Often times we see covers that feature headlines like, "Brittney puts on pounds," or "worst bikini bodies." As if that wasn't bad enough, the inside of these pages are an inescapable prison of self hate for adolescent girls. They flip through to find pictures of normal sized women being further chastised or labeled as obese. Many editors argue that these pieces are for entertainment, but is it truly entertaining to watch eating disorders rise and girls begin to hate themselves more and more? Once again, though many magazines feature pieces about teaching girls to love their bodies or portray role models who are happy with their looks, many more are on the opposite spectrum.

Emily responded to Susan in her written response sheet by writing,

Your ideas are very well supported throughout your entire paper. The best support, I thought, was in paragraph three when you talk about the stories that magazines run. I could relate to it because every time I go into Target or a gas station, I see articles like that. One way that you could make even more powerful by saying that some magazines try to break this hurtful cycle, but end up going back to the other stories because it is more entertaining. This means that magazines are just contradicting themselves when they print these headlines.

Ann's written response was very similar to Emily's:

The third body paragraph was also a high-note in your paper because it's something I've never truly considered. Perhaps one item you could add is in paragraph three you could maybe say how girls' magazines contradict themselves

18 **Emily** - Yeah.

19 **Ann** - and it's like she doesn't even look fat at all.

20 **Emily** – Yeah, and it's, it's not that she even looks fat, it's just what a
21 healthy person looks like

22 **Susan** - Yeah.

23 **Ann** - Yeah.

24 **Emily** – One thing that I thought you could add, it's just a little story that I
25 remember seeing in the news a while ago, about magazine ads is, I think it
26 was, yeah, Ralph Lauren,

27 **Susan** - Oh yeah

28 **Emily** - with an ad that was so over edited
29 that her head was wider than her hips, and they're like, oh it was a
30 mistake, but it still got out in the media,

31 **Susan** - Mmhmm

32 **Emily** - so I think, I don't know,
33 you don't have to add it, I just, that's what I thought of when I read that.

34 **Susan** – No, I was gonna put that into the part about the fashion industry,
35 but then I did not know if I should because I already had the thing about
36 Karl Lagerfeld

37 **Ann** – You could almost even add it into that kind of paragraph if you
38 wanted; I think that would be a good spot for it.

39 **Emily** – I think it, like—not that I am saying, [Ann], that your idea is bad,

40 but I think it would work better in with like with the photo shopping ad
41 because
42 **Susan** – Oh definitely, like the ads one about, yeah that would definitely
43 work
44 **Emily** – like it was taken so far that, like, her body, it didn't look like a
45 human body at all.
46 **Susan** – Yeah, okay. Yeah.

This speech event is an excellent example of Edelsky's (1981) multi-speaker conversational floor, where students build on one another's ideas to develop, in essence, a new text. For the purpose of this study, this concept will be referred to as idea generation (Cragun, Kasch, and Shields, 2009).

Ann brought the idea of how girls are represented in the media onto the floor when she said, "you could add in how magazines they contradict themselves because they place the articles, you know" (lines 2-4). Emily immediately tagged onto Ann's idea by saying, "I said that in mine too" (line 5). As the idea continued to emerge, each group member responded with either a "yeah" or another idea that built on the concept of women's portrayal in the media. Ann said, "like the flawless like good skin, like skinny girls, like you can see how it kind of contradicted itself because they do that" (lines 11-12). Emily immediately interjected, "I put the exact same thing" (line 13) and then she builds on the idea: "but I also, um, said that I really liked how you talked about magazines 'cuz every person who goes into a gas station sees like, "Oh Brittany got fat," and stuff like that" (lines 13-15). The overlapping talk and half thoughts evolve to the

point where the group is able to articulate the idea in more complete sentences. The idea of women's portrayal in the media seems to have evolved fully when Emily describes the Ralph Lauren ad, featuring a woman whose image has been so altered that her head is wider than her hips. The dialogue in this speech event is a powerful example of the recursive talk that Gavelek and Raphael (1996) suggest both links and extends ideas within a conversation.

It should be noted here that the students brought multiple texts to the floor as they generated new ideas about the portrayal of girls in magazines. They started, of course, with Susan's paper. They also included the texts of the rhetorical mode of cause and effect writing and the classroom expectations of this essay, and, in addition, the responders brought to the floor the texts of their own understandings of and personal experiences with fashion magazine layout.

Susan used this feedback to make some substantive revisions to her supporting paragraphs. Her new version of paragraph three incorporated some of these ideas:

Magazines, though not nearly as destructive to girls, also have their negative effects. Any person can walk into the nearest supermarket, Target, or doctor's office and find a tabloid bashing celebrities' body shapes. Often times we see covers that feature headlines like, "Brittney Puts on Pounds," or "Worst Bikini Bodies." As if that wasn't bad enough, the inside of these pages are an inescapable prison of self hate for adolescent girls. They flip through to find pictures of normal, healthy sized women being further chastised or labeled as obese while scrawny, undernourished women are placed on pedestals of beauty.

Many editors argue that these pieces are for entertainment, but is it truly entertaining to watch eating disorders rise and girls begin to hate themselves more and more? Some magazines, such as *Seventeen*, have begun featuring articles about learning to love one's self and even show fashion pieces with girls from many different body types. But *Seventeen* is just one magazine. Many more, like *People*, *The US Weekly*, and *OK!*, still feature the opposite spectrum of articles and continue to incubate repugnance.

In the next paragraph, Susan took the group's idea and added the Ralph Lauren example that they spoke of in their discussion:

A few months ago, Ralph Lauren was caught manufacturing an ad that had been so exceedingly modified that the circumference of the model's head had become larger than the diameter of her hips. The picture was horrifying to see, and, although Ralph Lauren's executives stated that the ad was never actually going to be run, it still got out into the media and into girl's minds.

In writing in her process journal about what she chose to use and to not use of her peer response, Susan noted, "I used the [Ralph Lauren] piece of advice because it made sense to use and that I had been trying to think of an example like that to use anyways." In this regard, it is clear that the group process led these three students to collectively generate an idea that became an essential component in Susan's support of her thesis statement. This discussion provides one of the clearest examples of how the multi-speaker, synergistic conversational floor frequently led students in this study to response that

made a significant difference as writers turned to the revision process to strengthen the content of their essays.

Nudging peers to consider new perspectives. In addition to observing patterns of the intertextual nature of the peer discourse and how new ideas emerged in the response process, another pattern appeared in the data: the response process and response itself pushed writers to consider new perspectives in regard to their writing, perspectives that they had not considered in the first drafts. This process is shown clearly in the speech event that follows.

Speech event 3. The next speech event illustrates how groups navigate their way through disagreement in the discussion process. Karen and Amy provided James with feedback on his cause and effect essay, which focused on political correctness. As they shared their ideas about the quality of his support, the students got into a discussion about the use of the term “melting pot.” In his first draft, James had written the following:

Now, it is understandable that not everyone celebrates Christmas, but it is unreasonable, even ridiculous, to demand that Christmas well-wishing be deemed offensive. Americans don't put up “Kwanzaa trees” and don't sing “Hanukah carols.” Although we are a “melting pot” and celebrate diversity, these holidays simply aren't a part of American culture as a whole. There is no need to erase the culture we do have in order to please the vast minority who may take “Merry Christmas” as a personal insult. In short, the day I see “Happy Holidays, Charlie Brown” is the day I move to Canada.”

This paragraph led to a rich discussion about the meaning of the terms “melting pot” and “celebrate diversity.” Karen noted in her written response that the terms are incongruous: “melting pot” means melding into the same while “celebrate diversity” implies appreciating differences. She wrote that they should not be used together. In the peer response talk session, Karen then brought the topic up for discussion:

1 **Karen** – Also, this whole “melting pot” thing. You had “melting pot” and
2 then “celebrate diversity.” “Melting pot” means everyone melds into the
3 same thing, and diversity is

4 **James** – Hold on, like, isn’t when they say like America is “the great
5 melting pot,” it means like all of the cultures come together?

6 **Amy** – Yeah.

7 **Karen** – They are all melding into one person, not into separate things.

8 **Amy** – I guess when /inaudible/

9 **Karen** – the “salad bar” was the one where everyone is all together but
10 they all make their own diversity.

11 **James** – That’s not. Really? ‘Cuz that’s not how

12 **Amy** – When we’re talking about technology, that’s not who we’re talking
13 about. We’re talking about how “melting pot” is all of the different
14 diversities, and we’re all coming together, not as one person, but as a
15 group, with all of the different diversities and cultures.

16 **James** – Yeah, that’s the way I always took it, maybe you just heard the
17 expression differently. I don’t know.

18 **Karen** - I've always taken "melting pot" is like when you melt
19 something, you combine them, like if you melt butter and sugar, you're
20 going to get a butter-sugar mixture. It's not going to be butter and sugar;
21 it's going to be butter-sugar. It's going to be one thing.
22 **Amy** – Sweetened butter.
23 **Karen** – Yes. It's going to be one object, and that's always how I took it,
24 and I don't know if you want to explain that, like how the "salad bar"
25 'cuz that's, that's the other one that's been used to describe America, 'cuz
26 that one's obvious that they are separate, whereas "melting pot's" a little
27 iffy
28 **James** – Alright.

This excerpt provides a clear example of students disagreeing with each other in a response session. Karen attempted to explain the difference in her perception of "melting pot." She brought in another term, "salad bar," to clarify her point. She explained that "melting pot" means a melding into one; "salad bar," on the other hand, refers to everyone coming together, but "they all make their own diversity." James was not convinced and suggested that they may have each heard the terms used differently. Karen did not back down, however. She created the analogy of "butter-sugar" (line 20) to drive her point home. In the end, James brought closure to the speech event when he said, "Alright." However, the questioning tone in his voice made it clear that he was still not sure. Karen had not convinced him that his word choice was, in fact, incorrect.

Karen went on to tell James that he really needed to rework this paragraph because it was almost completely incorrect. The reason we say, “Happy Holidays,” she asserted is to acknowledge the other many religions in our country besides Christianity. She literally begged James to change this in the next draft because, in her opinion, it made him sound like an “intolerant bigot,” which she knew from personal experience he was not.

In this speech event, the students, again, navigated multiple texts. First, the text of the writing course expectations told them that they need to use their terms correctly in their writing. Additionally, the students brought with them usages of the term “melting pot” that they may have heard in daily life. Furthermore, in the discussion, they were also appropriating knowledge that was learned in other classroom contexts, such as “the great melting pot” and “salad bowl,” and they attempted to connect it to James’ use of the term “melting pot.” In their discussion, it appeared that James and Amy have a similar interpretation of how the term should be used. Amy agreed with James. Karen, however, believed that the terms “salad bowl” more aptly describes what James was talking about. In the end, James accepted this, although with some clear hesitation.

In his revision, James made some significant changes based on the feedback he received from Karen. Even though his voice during the response session suggested some uncertainty about Karen’s assertion that he misused the term “melting pot,” in this final copy he did omit the term and simply used the phrase, “although we celebrate diversity”:

Now, it is understandable that not everyone celebrates Christmas, but it is unreasonable, even ridiculous, to demand that Christmas well-wishing be deemed

offensive. Americans don't put up "Kwanzaa trees" and don't sing "Hanukah carols." Although we celebrate diversity, these holidays simply aren't a part of American culture as a whole. There is no need to censor "Merry Christmas" from the media in order to please the vast minority who may not want to hear it. In short, while our "ends" may be noble, the "means" are not justifiable.

After the paper was completed and submitted for evaluation, James reflected on the feedback process in his process response journal. Even though the group discussion had some dissention and even some animated voices, James made it clear in his journal that he valued what his group members told him and used the vast majority of what they said in his revisions:

I chose to listen to most of my peers ideas, because I agreed with them that they would make my paper better. For example, in my last body paragraph, I ended with "In short, the day I see 'Happy Holidays, Charlie Brown' is the day I move to Canada." This was simply a bit of satire that I thought would add some flair to my paper but my peers told me it was a bit offensive. I agreed that it could be interpreted that way and omitted it from my paper. . . Holding my peers' input in high esteem, I did use most of the ideas they offered me in my paper. . . For me, what is working best about my response group is how well we work together. I consistently receive good feedback and my papers have improved as a result.

Although James did not address the specific "melting pot" question in his process journal, it is clear that he both valued and used his peers' response to improve his writing.

Again and again in both written and verbal peer feedback, responders pushed writers to consider new perspectives in their writing. This pattern of responders nudging writers to consider new viewpoints was essential in pushing the writers to improve their essays. The writers brought their own experiences and their individual knowledge bases to their first drafts. Revision means, quite literally, to “re-see.” The eyes of their peer responders served as a new and fresh vantage point from which writers were then able to re-see their own ideas. Several of them noted in their process journals how helpful these new perspectives were. Sophia wrote, “Having these two additional opinions helps me see my paper in different ways.” Connie agreed when she wrote, “The purpose of the response group is to work on revising our papers and experience the point of view of others. I think the writing groups, essentially, fulfill this purpose.” Becca pointed to the importance of multiple perspectives when she wrote, “I feel like the peer response groups help my paper a lot because a lot of the times I can write biased papers and my group members help me see when I am being biased and when I need to input more information from the other side of the argument.” Amy summed it up by writing, “It is always good to have a different outlook on the papers to catch something that might not have been caught in the first place.” Susan noted, “by listening to the other responders, I would hear advice that I hadn’t even ever considered before.” Clearly, one of the aspects that writers appreciated in the peer response was that it pushed them to consider new perspectives in their writing.

Additional Themes from Student Reflections

Although they were not patterns that emerged across the multiple texts of the study, several important themes emerged as the students reflected on the writing and response process. These themes were revealed through the students' process journals and in follow-up interviews that were conducted with a number of the study participants. The ideas reflected in these themes are certainly important considerations teachers and students who are involved in peer response groups.

Just say no. One essential theme that emerged in the writers' process journals was that, although participants valued the response that they received and, in fact, used that response to improve their writing, students also made many deliberate decisions *not to use* some of the feedback they received. This is consistent with one of the curricular elements of the peer response group work in this classroom. As groups began their peer response at the start of the year, it was stressed that the writer always has the autonomy to decide what response to use and what response not to use. Based on their process journals, it appears that students were very comfortable making the intentional decision of not utilizing some peer response suggestions. In some instances, the writer simply disagreed with the responder. Will provided an example of this when he wrote, "My group told me that my second supporting paragraph had two different points and that I should split it in two. I disagreed. In my opinion, I thought my ideas were all connected together. It would be unnecessary for me to split it up." Sophia provides another example when she wrote, "Ben suggested that I get rid of my second paragraph. I decided to keep this paragraph. Although he thought it was a confusing paragraph that draws the reader

away, I think it is needed to help set the tone and to give some of my opposing viewpoint.” Additionally, Susan explained why she did not take Emily’s suggestions: “Emily had suggested I add a rebuttal about the cutting down of rainforests for farming purposes, but my thesis and essay were more directed toward the furniture industry harvesting rainforest timber. For that reason, I excluded the feedback.”

In other cases, conflicting opinions within the group led the writer to ignore some, or all, of the response. Julia pointed to such a conflict when she wrote, “If both of my group members wrote different suggestions about the same sentence, I would look them both over and use the correction that I liked the most.” In such situations of conflicting response, Lauren found a different solution: “The two responses especially seemed to be conflicting in the area of my paper’s thesis and opposing viewpoint. For this, I got a third opinion and they agree with the first peer response.” Kayla brought in a new dynamic of giving one group member’s ideas preference over the other when she wrote, “While it was nice to have the first group member’s input, I am very cautious when taking some of her advice.” Kayla went on to explain that she trusted the second group members’ opinions more and, consequently, did not use the first group members’ input as much.

The students’ voices show that they did not have a problem with saying “no thank you” to some of the response ideas that they received from their peers.

Group rapport matters. Another theme that emerged in the students’ process journals was that group membership and the rapport that developed within the response groups did have an impact on both the operation of the group and on the quality of the response that students gave. It is important to reiterate that I formed these groups after

students gave input about which class members they worked well with and which they did not work well with. As written previously, in each case, I honored the “not-work-well-with” list. Additionally, in virtually every group, members were put with at least one person from their “work-well-with” list.

On the positive side, a number of students wrote about how important it was that they got along well with their fellow group members. Alex noted, “We all get along and we are comfortable speaking our mind in front of each other, which really helps in getting our points across.” Alex’s group members, Nikki and Emma agreed. Individually, they also wrote about the positive rapport in the group. Emma wrote, “We are now extremely familiar with one another’s style of writing, as well as comfortable enough around each other to give and accept criticism. The responses that I receive are always honest, detailed, and valuable to my revision process.” Group 4, consisting of Susan, Emily, and Ann, were also close friends. One of the most synergistic groups in the study, they saw their friendship as leading to positive group results. Emily wrote, “I think what makes our group dynamic so great is that we are all pretty good friends, and we want each other to do well. [We] are always as honest as we can possibly be when it comes to the response, and that’s what makes our papers better.” Ann stated it in this way, “The fact that we are all pretty tight buds doesn’t interfere with our work ethic, and we always get down to business right away. We are sincere with our advice that we give and always are in the best interest of the writer.”

When rapport was not as well established or individuals were simply not as comfortable with all group members, a less positive dynamic emerged. Julia wrote about

her discomfort in providing verbal feedback to her peers: “The verbal talk is a little uncomfortable for me, since I haven’t worked with or really know my other group members very much, but it all works out in the end.” Clearly, Julia’s hesitation to engage in verbal talk came from lack of confidence in not knowing her group members well. Interestingly, her other partners seemed to take her hesitancy to engage verbally as an insult, or, minimally, as something negative. Kayla wrote, “She doesn’t talk very much in our discussions. Sometimes she’ll say that she likes the paper (or she won’t say anything), but then she’ll rip the paper apart in the written response.” The third group member, Marie, wrote similarly about Julia’s relative silence in the speaking sessions when she noted that “one member wasn’t as active in voicing her opinion as the other member.” Marie went on to note, however, that when it came to the written response on the peer response sheets, both group members gave her an equal amount of response. Marie and Kayla simply do not understand that Julia’s hesitation to speak is actually out of respect for these two girls, whom she does not know well. She is simply not comfortable telling them in face-to-face discussion what she is willing to “say” on the written response sheets.

The feedback of these students regarding the membership and rapport in their response groups is an important consideration for any teacher who wants to use response groups in the classroom. Clearly, rapport matters to students.

Responders as writers. A final theme that emerged in the follow-up interviews that were conducted after both of the writing and responding sequences were completed is the fact that students almost unanimously believed that being a peer responder in itself

improved their own craft as writers. In other words, it was not just the feedback that they received from their group members that made their essays stronger. Rather, the experience of responding to their peers pushed the students to think about their own writing and reexamine what they had written. This metacognitive analysis, in the students' minds, strengthened their own writing. Connie said, "Learning how to analyze an essay and think about how it could improve helped me to look at my own work from an objective perspective and improve upon it throughout the writing process." Ann reflected on how being a responder improved her writing when she said,

I found that being a responder to other people's work made me look at my own work in a different light. I would critique their work . . . and then I would realize that I should check my own paper for it, too. It made me look at my essays with a more critical eye, because I would comment on items that would make their papers stronger, only to realize that the same items could be altered and switched up on mine, too. It really opens your eyes.

Emily believed she was better able to help herself as a writer after she had first helped her peers: "Usually, if someone has the same problem I do, I have an easier time helping them first and then applying my own advice to my papers. This made me more aware of the problems in my paper and how I could fix them." Alex asserted that the high quality of his peers' writing positively affected his own writing, "Having to respond to good writing, in turn, improved my writing as well. Seeing what works for other writers and thinking of ways to improve already exceptional papers really stretched my own writing skills." Will thought about it from a teaching perspective: "They say that you only truly

understand something if you are able to teach it to others. I think this is true with writing, and the practice we got out of responding to others' papers helped us better understand how to write more effectively." Jordan and Julia talked about how seeing the high quality of their peers' writing made them realize that their first drafts were sub-standard, and this inspired them to "step it up" in their revisions. Finally, Sophia shared an idea that was reflected by a number of her classmates: "When I answer the response questions for their papers, and when I go back and edit mine, it helps me to almost be another 'peer responder' on my own paper." Sophia's idea is powerful in her belief that the process of responding creates an opportunity to look at her own writing from a new set of eyes.

It is clear that the majority of the students in the study believed that being a responder not only helped their peers improve their writing but also helped them, the responders, improve their craft.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented some of the results of the data collected in this research study. The data discussed in this chapter was drawn from several sources: the students' peer response sheets, the students' first drafts, the transcripts of the peer response sessions, the students' final drafts, the students' process journals, and follow-up interviews conducted after the writing/response processes were complete. These data provide a window into the actual the discourse of the peer response groups and how and why students are utilizing that discourse in their revision process.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the significance of these results and implications for classroom teachers. In addition, I will discuss the limitations of this study and make suggestions for further research on the topic of peer response groups in the classroom.

Chapter 5. Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

In this chapter I will revisit the research question that guided this study and provide a summary of both the study and its findings. After that I will discuss implications of these findings for researchers as this study adds to the literature of peer response groups through its focus on student discourse and its effect on the revision process. Furthermore, I will discuss implications for teachers who either use peer writing groups or may want to use them in the classroom. I will also discuss the limitations of this study, and, finally, will provide suggestions for future research on the topic of peer response groups in the classroom.

Revisiting the Research Question and Research Process

The use of peer response groups in the writing classroom is an integral part of the composing process for many teachers of writing and clearly deserves renewed attention by both researchers and teachers (Paulson, Alexander and Armstrong, 2007). In particular very little current research has examined what it is that students write and say to one another in peer group settings and how that discourse affects the students' revision process. It was the need for additional current research, coupled with my own classroom use of peer response groups during the last twenty-nine years that spurred my interest in this study. The research question that guided the study was:

What happens in the students' discourse within peer response groups in relation to the revision of student writing?

The participants of this study were all seniors in a College-in-the-Schools/AP composition class offered at a northern Minnesota high school through an area college.

All 24 students in the course volunteered for the study. The data were collected from the eight peer response groups in this study and consisted of the students' first drafts of their cause/effect and argumentative essays; the peer response sheets, which students completed in writing about their peers' papers before the discussion sessions occurred; the transcripts of the 16 peer response discussion sessions; the revisions of the cause/effect and argumentative essays; the student process journals; and the transcripts of student follow-up interviews.

The first layer of analysis included speech situations across groups to catalogue discussion topics, level of engagement with the task, and to identify occurrences of focused and sustained discussion of the writing task. The second layer focused on selected group speech events (Coulthard, 1985), which were transcribed for analysis to identify discursive dynamics and functions of student talk. The third layer was a close analysis of identified speech events in relation to students' writing. Finally, I was able to study the process journal reflections that students wrote after they had completed the entire writing and response process and the follow-up interview transcripts that were conducted after the process journals were written. I applied the constant comparative method to both the written and spoken texts of students' speech situations (Bakhtin, 1986), whereby the data were analyzed concurrently in order to search for patterns and themes in the students' discourse.

Summary of the Findings

Students are on task. One of the first findings in the discourse of the students in the peer response groups is that, despite concerns that some teachers have expressed that

students in peer response groups are frequently off task, students in this study were largely focused on task talk (Brice, 1998; Cragan, Kasch, & Shields, 2009). This finding aligns with the observations of Gere and Abbott (1985), who found in their study that students do focus their response group time on talking about their peers' writing.

One of the factors that may have played into this focused task talk is that students completed the peer response sheets in writing before the verbal session. These response sheets served as a framework around which the student talk emerged. As noted in Chapter 4, these groups spent virtually no time on what Cragan, Kasch, and Shields (2009) refer to as orientation talk, that is, the “what-are-we-supposed-to-be-doing” talk that is a typical starting point for many peer groups. With their written peer response sheets in hand, these students launched into their discussions by discussing the first item on the response sheet.

This does not mean that these groups were always on-task. There certainly was some off-task talk. It was, however, minimal. Group members knew that they needed to be able to discuss the three essays within the 49-minute class period, so when off-task talk did occur, individual group members were quick to bring the group back on task.

Rapport matters. Another finding of this study was that group rapport mattered to students both in terms of what students wrote and said to each other and how writers received that response. First, although they worded it in a number of ways, several students discussed in their process journals that, because they got along well with group members, a feeling of trust developed within the group. This trust is an essential component of any successful peer response group (Brice, 2002; Dossin, 2003). Building

on a trusting foundation, students knew that group members had each other's best interests in mind. Alex noted, "We all get along and we are comfortable speaking our mind in front of each other, which really helps in getting our points across." Students knew that their peers were going to be honest in their feedback and that all group members were willing to put a great deal of work into their response. Emma wrote, "We are now extremely familiar with one another's style of writing, as well as comfortable enough around each other to give and accept criticism. The responses that I receive are always honest, detailed, and valuable to my revision process." When groups got along well, the synergy of the group (Baird and Weinberg, 1981) was such that more attention was spent on group action than on group maintenance. This allowed groups members to focus their attention on very specific details in the peer response.

In a couple of cases, groups did not have this same high level of synergy. One example of this was in Group 3 (Julia, Marie, and Kayla), where Julia was relatively quiet in the speaking sessions, and the other two group members seemed to take her reticence as a sign of intentional non-participation. Julia noted in her own process journal that it was simply taking her a while to get used to sharing verbal response with the other two girls, whom she did not know very well. Marie and Kayla acknowledged independently that Julia's written response was very detailed; however, because she knew Marie better and had an outside-of-class friendship with her, Kayla acknowledged that she was more inclined to give Marie's feedback preference over Julia's.

As evidenced in their process journals, rapport was an important factor in determining how group members perceived their groups to be functioning, as well as it

was a factor in what feedback writers chose to use in the revision process and what they did not use.

Student response is intertextual. Student talk in these peer response groups was intertextual. Students were aware of the purpose of their response—to help their group members improve their writing. In working toward this objective, students frequently drew on multiple texts as a means of explaining their ideas. Some of these texts were drawn from personal experience. This was seen as students in Group 4 discussed the concept of grieving for loved ones who had died. Emily brings the text of her own personal experiences with loss of loved ones and grieving to the conversational floor (p. 97). This personal text was pivotal in fashioning the discussion that ensued. Other texts were drawn from common classroom experience. The “melting pot” discussion (p. 110) is an excellent example of how students carried texts from other classroom learning to their conversational floor. The group members had heard this term and had used it in a number of classroom contexts, and they drew on those experiences in an attempt to clarify whether or not James was using the term correctly. As students drew from these intertextual resources, they gave voice to multiple perspectives on the topic that was being discussed in their groups (Brice, 2002). These multiple perspectives, in turn, helped to create new text through the group discussion, which gave writers diverse ideas that they could choose from in working to improve their papers during the revision process.

The analysis of the data showed that these students were responding in a way that aligned with the course curriculum. In each group, responders provided feedback that was thoughtful, specific and anchored in the 6-Traits assessment model that was used in the

evaluation of these essays. Students pointed back very specifically to each other's writings and made very detailed suggestions of ways to improve the essay. This pointing back and these detailed suggestions for improvement were a central part of the curriculum of this course. In other words, this is the kind of response that students were taught to provide for one another, and it illustrates the intertextual nature of the peer response discourse.

Strong group synergy led to the richest and most generative response.

Acknowledging the idea that focused response was generated in all of the peer groups, it was also clear, however, that something very special was happening in the groups whose discussion emerged through the multi-speaker conversational floor. In these groups, the discussion tended to be more synergistic and generative. Because of the interactive nature of these discussions, it was in these groups that the idea generation surpassed the richness of the idea generation in the one-speaker-at-a-time groups. It was also in these multi-speaker groups that students were the most engaged. This was seen in the active body language of the peer group members and was heard both in the intonation of the responders' voices and in the pacing of the discussion. In the most interactive groups, students were more likely to be physically animated as they talked, frequently making big body, hand, and facial gestures. Dialogue was frequently overlapped and students built on each other's ideas by actually quickening the pace of their talking. This led to richer and more diverse response than the response generated in the groups where a one-speak-at-a-time conversational floor emerged. In practical terms, students in the multi-speaker groups received response that dug deeper into their papers, and they simply received

more response than writers in the single-speaker groups. The new texts that students in these groups created in their discussions were rich and gave these writers many options as they started the revision process.

Peer response pushed writers to consider new perspectives. Whether or not writers chose to use specific suggestions that their responders made, the response itself pushed the writers to consider different perspectives. Many of the students commented in their process journals on the fact that their peers' feedback forced them to think about their topic in new ways. Some students noted that these new perspectives allowed them to view their own writing more objectively. A couple of students wrote that, previous to their peer response, they were too close to their subject matter; it was hard for them to be objective. This was particularly true when the topic was of a personal nature. When these writers received the response from their peers, they were then able to look at their own writing with a new objectivity because the responders gave the writers a new lens through which they could examine their own words. These students were engaged in what Perl (1986) calls "projective structuring" (p. 35), the ability to write for themselves but with an awareness of the reader's needs. Whether or not the writers chose to use the suggestions during the revision process, many of the writers commented on how helpful it was to see their work from this new perspective.

Peer response helped writers to improve their essays. To a large degree, students did take the response from their peers, and they used it in their revision process to improve their papers. This improvement was evident in the analysis of the final drafts compared with the first drafts. Additionally, the writers themselves believed that the

feedback they received helped them strengthen the final drafts of the essays. This perceived improvement on the part of the writers is the focus of much of their writing in the process journals.

As noted in Chapters 3 and 4 of this paper, student response was initially guided by the peer response sheets, which asked students to analyze the paper against the framework of 6-Traits writing assessment (Spandel, 2001). Because this assessment method is used within the English department district wide as a means of discussing with students qualities of effective writing, the students in this study were accustomed to talking about their own and each other's writing in terms of the 6-Traits model: organization, ideas, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions. Once students turn their assignments in, the papers were also evaluated by the teacher using the language and rubrics of this 6-Trait assessment method. Again and again in their essays, students made significant improvements in several of these 6-Traits areas. In particular, focused student response about both the organization and support of ideas within the writers' essays led to revised drafts that were substantially improved.

This improvement was not only noted by me as researcher. Students also widely believed that the response that they received from their peers led them to improved writing in their essays. Students wrote about improvement both very specifically and also more holistically. Susan wrote,

One section of my paper that both Ann and Emily pointed out a problem with was the length of my introduction. At first I thought it was fine, but after listening to what they had to say, it made perfect sense that my introduction was too long. In

fact, after rereading it, I realized I had sort of gone off into a little tangent of nothingness.

Based on her peers' feedback, Susan revised her introduction by tightening its focus. Many other students provided similarly specific response about how peers' feedback helped them to improve their papers. On a broader level, Julia noted that "the constructive criticism they gave truly helped my paper to become more focused, organized, and clear." Grace agreed when she wrote, "All of the members of my group give very constructive feedback, and it helps in making my paper better." Clearly, the students in this study valued the response of their peers, and they used a great deal of that response to improve their writing.

Students are able to maintain ownership and authorial control. Spigelman (2000) points to textual ownership as a critical component of any writing class. She notes, however, that in peer response settings, participants are expected to relinquish some degree of ownership in order to allow their texts, at least temporarily, to become "community property" (p. 2). This can lead to concerns of ownership of the writing. Spigelman notes that when writers believe that they have authority over their own texts, they are more inclined to solicit and use the feedback that peers give them. This navigation of authority seems to have played out within the writing groups in this study.

As much as students did value their peers' feedback, and as much as they acknowledged that they used that feedback to improve their essays, writers also appeared to feel very comfortable in not following some of the suggestions that their responders provided. Again and again in their process journal entries, students highlighted specific

areas of response that they used in their revisions, as well as many suggestions that they chose to ignore. In this study, students seemed wholly able to listen to their peers and then decide which ideas they liked and which they did not. This was consistent with one of the curricular goals of the course: the writer always maintains authority of what advice to take and what advice to ignore. The responder's job is to simply provide the writer with some possibilities for revision.

Being responders helped students to improve their own writing. Eighteen of the students in the study were interviewed after they had completed all aspects of both writing sequences. They were asked the following questions:

1. What in the writing/response process affected your writing the most?
2. How did being a responder affect your own writing?

Although they worded it in different ways, all 18 of the interviewed students insisted that being a responder for others helped them improve their own writing. They did not use this language, but what they were talking about was a metacognitive awareness that emerged during the process of reading their peers' papers. The students noted that they saw both limitations in the work of the peers as well as strengths, and they were able to use this response experience then to improve their own writing. For example, in some instances, as they read their peers' paper, they saw shortcomings in organization or in support of ideas that, upon reflection, they realized were also shortcomings in their own essay. This caused them to go back and revisit their own ideas and organizational structure. In responding to others, the students gained an awareness of their own writing

and their own writing processes. They were able to take the response experience and transfer it to their own writing.

Implications for Researchers

Previous to this study, a significant amount of research had been conducted on the topic of peer response groups. Several of these studies, particularly those out of the mid-late 1980s, are still considered definitive studies in this field. Gaps remain, however, in the scope and focus of this research.

Berkenkotter (1984) found it difficult to generalize how writers actually respond to their readers. She advised teachers to use peer response cautiously because of “subtle emotional and intellectual factors” (p. 318) involved in the process. Gere and Abbott (1985) found that the students’ grade level affects the topics that they approach in their oral peer response session: the younger students in the study attended more to content issues, and the older students attended to issues of form. In her ethnographic study, Freedman (1987) found that the teacher’s approach to peer response groups has a powerful effect on both the group discourse and the response process. Nystrand and Brandt (1989) and Nystrand (1999) found that the revisions of students who worked in peer response groups were of higher quality than those who did not work in writing groups. Through their peer response, students did improve the quality of their writing. A flurry of research activity in the 1980s and 1990s about peer response led to a period of relative inactivity. More recently, Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong (2007) studied students’ eye movement during the response process and found that students are able to identify areas of the text that offer rich feedback potential. The study found, however,

that response may be most effective if students first review texts for editing concerns and then respond to more holistic content issues.

Clearly, there has been substantial research in the area of peer response. At the same time, the gap in research still exists in regard to the students' discourse in peer response groups in relation to their revision process. That has been the focus of this study, and the results of this study have, in fact, brought some important considerations to the body of research that exists on this topic.

In this study, the students' voices, as revealed in their journals and follow-up interviews, gave a very clear picture of what was going on in individual students' thought processes as they decided which peer response to use in their revisions and which not to use. Several of the earlier studies (Berkenkotter, 1984; Freedman, 1987; Gere and Abbott, 1985) focus on student discourse but make no connections to the students' revision. Nystrand and Brandt (1989) and Nystrand (1999) show that peer response does improve students' writing in the revision process; however, these studies do not include students' own perceptions of their writing. Findings in this study demonstrate that group rapport matters a great deal to students both in terms of the feedback they are willing to give and how they choose to use or not use the feedback they received. These findings suggest that students are most inclined to give rich feedback when they have strong rapport within their peer response groups. A strong trust level within the group not only helped in the quality of the feedback students gave, but it also led writers to trust their peers' response and use the response ideas to improve their essays. These students made it clear that

because they trusted their peer responders, they put great value in what the responders actually said about the essay.

The current study also found that the response from peers did help students to improve their writing in the revision process. Like the earlier studies, this finding was revealed through a close analysis of the first drafts, the peer response, and the final drafts. What this current study added to the body of research, however, were the actual student voices, brought out in their process journals and follow-up interviews, as the students reflected on how the revision process improved their writing. Consequently, in addition to the evidence of improvement that was revealed in the analysis of the first drafts compared with the final drafts, the students themselves believed that their writing had improved because of the peer response. In fact each of the 24 participants wrote about the improvement in their writing at the sentence-level, paragraph-level or whole-essay level, improvement that the students credited to the response they received from their group members.

A significant finding in the study was students' construction of the conversational floor. Building on the foundation of the conversational floor, articulated by Edelsky (1984), this study painted a clear picture of how students whose discussion emerges from a multi-speaker conversational floor are able to generate ideas in a collaborative, generative manner that leads to richer response than those groups whose response emerges from a one-speaker-at-a-time mode. In six of the eight groups that were studied, this synergistic and generative process led to rich response, which participants almost unanimously agreed helped them to improve the quality of writing. This finding suggests

that talk is significant in helping students to articulate their ideas and to collaboratively build on those ideas during their group sessions. In the process, the group generates new and rich texts for the writers to consider during the revision process.

Furthermore, Spigelman (2000) raises the concern of authorial ownership when students in writing groups voluntarily relinquish their individual writing voices when they become the part of the group process of responding. The students' voices in this study, however, reveal that students were very comfortable in taking the suggestions of their peer responders and using them to improve their own individual ideas as writers. The process journals in this study revealed that students were able to make very deliberate choices about which response to use and which response to ignore. At no point in this process did any students note that they were concerned about losing their own voices or ideas when they considered their peers' suggestions while revising. This finding suggests that fears of students losing control of their voice during the response and revision processes may be unfounded. Students navigated their peers' response deliberately and felt that they had total control of their written content.

Finally, through the follow-up interviews that were conducted after the entire writing sequences were complete, this study points to a very important finding: students who were interviewed unanimously agreed that being peer responders for their classmates helped them to improve their own writing. These students described a metacognitive process that led them, literally as they were reading and responding to their peers' writing, to reflect on their own writing and realize that the shortcomings in their peers' papers were, in fact, shortcomings in their own writing. These students noted that

after they finished their peer responses, they revisited their own writing and made revisions to their writing because they had responded to their peers' papers. This is an important finding that warrants further attention.

In summary then, this study revealed that student discourse can play a very important role in the students' revision process. In particular, student talk was especially valuable. Although the peer response sheets helped students to organize their individual ideas before the response sessions, it was during the actual talk sessions that students were able to collectively build on their ideas in a way that allowed new texts to be created. These new texts, according to the students themselves, were very helpful during the revision process. To the student, these writers used their peers' response to improve their essays.

Implications for Teachers

As I think about the implications of this study for teachers, I am reminded of the voices of concern that I heard from teachers about peer response groups at last year's Minnesota Council of Teachers of English conference. Some of these teachers expressed concerns about keeping students on task. Others were frustrated with the superficial qualities of the response. In remembering these voices, I am reminded that implementing peer response groups can be tricky business. Based on this study, there are a number of implications for teachers who are interested in using peer response groups at the high school level. These implications could lead to some suggestions that might help alleviate some of the concerns that teachers have about peer response groups.

Give students a voice in group membership. Because group maintenance and rapport were important considerations in the students' minds, it seems important to provide students with some authority over how groups are formed. As a teacher, I would never argue that peer response groups should be selected exclusively by the students—in fact, I would argue against this. I have seen too many cases as a classroom teacher where complete student choice in terms of group membership excludes some students who never seem to be chosen. This can and should be avoided. In addition, I have seen plenty of situations where best friends are not necessarily best group members, especially as it affects staying on task and of giving honest feedback. These ideas being written, nevertheless, as the researcher in this study, I do also maintain that student input into group membership is very important. In their process journals, students discussed, again and again, the importance of their group “getting along well” and how that led to an accepting environment for giving and receiving feedback. A number of students, when given the opportunity before groups were formed, did submit the names of select students with whom they do not work well. In order for a group to function effectively, students need to develop a high trust level within their groups. That trust level is very difficult to develop and maintain in settings where group members feel threatened or uncomfortable for whatever reasons. Consequently, it seems important to give the students a voice in the group formation process.

With these same ideas in mind, teachers might want to avoid any system that mixes up group members from week-to-week or project-to-project. In their process journals and follow-up interviews, a number of students talked about how the rapport and

group function were getting better and better as the trimester went along. In other words, they described a process that was developed and nurtured over time throughout the thirteen-week term. Their group performance was enhanced by the increasing longevity of their work together. It takes time to know how the group should function and to develop the trust with individual members of the group. It would not make sense to set groups back in this regard by forcing them to navigate a new group process with new members.

Teach the skills students will need. In this study, students were very pleased with the feedback that their peers provided for them. The students' written and verbal feedback from the peer response sheets and the verbal sessions moved well beyond superficial comments that some teachers have complained about. Using the 6-Traits framework as a guide, students were able to develop a "critical eye" as they examined the work of their peers. Their response, in most cases, drew attention to very important rhetorical elements in their peers' writing. The peer groups' transcripts revealed a great deal of discussion about the importance and clarity of the writer's ideas, about perceived structural problems in the essay, and about the quality of the details writers used to support their ideas. Responders spent a great deal of time discussing the flow of the writers' ideas and the importance of transitional writing strategies that could improve that flow. This is the kind of feedback that English teachers themselves will typically provide when responding to students' writing.

Part of the reason for this rich response might have been the fact that, as a part of the course curriculum, the students were taught very specifically how to give rich

feedback. Many teachers and researchers agree about the importance of teaching response skills in order to maximize the effects of the student feedback (Brice, 2002; Calkins, 2008; Dossin, 2003; Franklin, 2010; Klockow, 2008; Launspach, 2008; Newkirk, 1984; Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong, 2007; VanDeWeghe, 2004). In this study, these response skills not only showed students how to respond, but these strategies seemed to have helped strengthen the students' confidence in believing that they have something important to say to their peers. The transcripts revealed very little hesitation in what the students said to each other. Rather most students shared ideas with confidence that, in some instances in the study, could be described as assertiveness.

This teaching of effective response can take a number of forms. First, it is important to teach students that effective response, whether highlighting strengths or limitations in the writer's work, points back to specific pieces of the writer's writing. Effective response is very detailed. Effective response also holds the writers work up to a high standard and usually offers specific recommendations for how the writing can be strengthened. In teaching this, teachers can provide models for students, either response that the teachers create themselves or response from former students. After articulating what helpful response looks like, the teacher can have a group of students do a fish bowl where responders provide feedback for a writer within their group, followed up with a class discussion about the value of the response they heard. It is also advisable to give students practice in responding before they begin the actual work in their peer response groups. For example, the teacher could project a piece of writing and have the class collaboratively build a response to that piece. Again, there are a number of strategies that

teachers can employ to teach students how to be effective responders. What is important is that teachers do, in fact, teach these skills directly. Only then, will students be able to create their own effective response.

Limitations of the Research

One limitation of this research was the fact that it focused on only one class of 12th grade writers. This meant that the study was conducted with only eight peer response groups involved. Because of the small sample size, the claim cannot be made that the data collected in this study are indicative of all 12th grade writers. Additionally, it was purely by chance that this year's class consisted of twenty girls and only four boys. In typical years, there would be a more even number of boys and girls in this class.

Secondly, by the design of the course, these students represented, for the most part, the top 25% of their class academically. As noted in Chapter 3, these students were very motivated to succeed academically. They put themselves in a course that they knew had a summer reading requirement, and they were very aware of the fact that this was a college writing course offered on their high school campus. Again, it should not be assumed that the data from this group of students would be indicative of all high school writers.

Suggestions for Future Research

The topic of the discourse of peer response groups and how that discourse affects the revision process warrants further research. Having received a fair amount of attention in the mid-1980s to the 1990s, it is a topic that calls for more research in current times.

This study focused on one classroom of academically talented writers and examined what they wrote and said to each other in their peer response groups and how that discourse affected the writers' revision process. A number of important questions were not the focus of this research but warrant attention:

1. Do males and females approach peer response in writing groups similarly?
2. Is there a difference in how males and females receive and use the peer response provided by group members?
3. This class functioned at a relatively high level in their peer response. Was the high level of response related to the academic level of these students? Would the results be similar with a class of regular composition students (as opposed to this self-selected, college-bound group)?
4. How does the classroom teacher's role affect the quality of response that students give and how that response is utilized by the writers?
5. Many students in this study believed that being a responder improved their skills as writers. More research is needed on the possible correlation between responding to writers and improving one's own writing.

This study has shed a light on the discourse of peer response groups and how that discourse affects the revisions that students make in their papers. At the same time, many questions remain and warrant further inquiry.

Conclusion

Haneda and Wells (2000) argue that the process of becoming literate is a social process that only occurs in a discourse community in which a reader and writer is a

member, or wants to become a member. Vygotsky (1986), Bakhtin (1986), and Freire (2000) all valued social interaction as not only a means of becoming literate but as a means to becoming a contributing member of society. These are all important considerations for why teachers would want to employ peer writing groups in their classrooms. The voices do not stop with these renowned theorists, however.

This study has uncovered the voices of a number of high school writers. Although the students shared their own individual and unique ideas as they were providing response to their peers during the course of this trimester, their voices came together in one regard: to the person, these students found great value in the response that they received from their peers. They believed that the response helped them to improve their writing. It is because of these voices that teachers should consider using peer response groups in their composition classrooms. No one said it more powerfully than Emma when she wrote, “After experiencing the value of my writing group, I wouldn’t feel comfortable handing in a paper without having people I trust evaluate it first.”

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Appendix A

Peer Response Sheet for Cause/Effect Essay

responding to

1. Analyze the effectiveness of the writer's lead. To what degree does it "draw the reader in"? How can it be even stronger?
2. Discuss the clarity of the writer's purpose as presented in the thesis. How can the writer make the thesis idea clearer?
3. Using your 6-Traits rubric, analyze the "ideas" in this essay. Include detailed suggestions as to how these ideas can be improved.
4. Using your 6-Traits rubric, analyze the "organization" of this essay. Include detailed suggestions as to how the organization can be improved.
5. Characterize the use of cause/effect in the essay. To what degree is it essential to the paper? How effective is its use as a writing mode?
6. Analyze the effectiveness of the support in the essay? Are the ideas well supported with detail? Make suggestions as to how the writer can support the ideas of the essay more effectively.
7. Provide any other suggestions that you can that will help the writer as she/he approaches revision.

Appendix B

Peer Response Sheet for Argumentative Essay

responding to

1. Analyze the effectiveness of the writer's lead. To what degree does it "draw the reader in"? How can it be even stronger?
2. Is the writer's thesis clear to you? Restate it.
3. Summarize the author's opposing viewpoint. Is it clear to you? How might its use be strengthened?
4. Using your 6-Traits rubric, analyze the "organization" of this essay. Include detailed suggestions as to how the organization can be improved.
5. Analyze the effectiveness of the support in the essay? Are there any flaws in logic? Make suggestions as to how the writer can support the ideas of the essay more effectively.
6. Please make any other suggestions that you can for the writer.