Tutors' Voices

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BUILDING TRUST AND COMMUNITY IN PEER WRITING GROUP CLASSROOMS

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Every semester, thousands of college students encounter their first experience with college writing. Most of them have no idea what is expected from them at this academic level, how to write using appropriate college discourse, or how to become better writers. If they are basic writers, their difficulties and anxieties are that much greater. This is why many writing teachers arrange their developmental writing students into peer writing groups, where they are given the opportunity to read their papers aloud and to develop their ideas with the help of others. Much research has shown that peer groups can be an important contribution to writing improvement (Bruffee 1978; Gere 1987; Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans 1994). However, many basic writers have not had experience in group work, or they are insecure about their writing or uncomfortable criticizing their peers' essays, and because of this, writing groups are not always as productive as they might be (Spear 1988; Bishop 1988; Zhu 1995).

As part of a project intended to encourage more active collaboration in one basic writing class, I was one of five specially selected education majors who were invited to serve as peer group leaders at a branch campus of a large university. As a peer group leader, I had responsibility for meeting with three first-year writers in their developmental writing class. My job was to model positive group behavior and to help my group of basic writing students learn how to respond to their peers' essays. In this role, I wanted to encourage my group members to develop confidence in their individual and collaborative decisions as writers and readers, since these group discussions were intended to guide group members as they revised their essays. However, I soon discovered that while writing groups can help students develop their writing skills, the question of trust among members must be addressed if students are to be confident in their

ability to establish effective written communication. This is particularly important when students in the group reveal different levels of writing competency.

This small case study of three developmental writers attempts to discover how peer group collaboration contributes to writing improvement. Specifically, it concentrates on the question of trust and on the role of the peer group leader in building trust among group members when students have a wide range of skills and abilities. What follows is a description of the writing difficulties faced by three basic writers involved in the classroom writing group and an investigation into how the development of trust within the peer group helped the writers to overcome the difficulties.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

As a peer group leader, I met with my assigned peer group once a week during their fifty minutes of class time. I also attended a weekly peer tutoring seminar with four other peer group leaders, in which we assessed our classroom experiences, discussed assigned readings in composing theory and writing group theory, and planned for subsequent peer group sessions. In order to stay in touch with my students' progress as group members and as individual writers, I often took notes about what happened in our workshop sessions and described these exchanges in my weekly journal entries. This helped me to see whether the suggestions made during peer group meetings were really used in their revised papers and whether revising, based on the suggestions, helped the students to write stronger papers. My notes also allowed me to review the sessions to determine recurring individual writing problems, so that I could plan ways to help the group intervene for further progress. In addition, following a strategy described by Byron L. Stay in "Talking about Writing: An Approach to Teaching Unskilled Writers" (1985), I asked my group early in the semester what each of them considered the most difficult part of writing. Their answers gave me a good stepping-stone to understanding how they perceived themselves as writers in relation to how I perceived them based on writing samples. These insights were particularly helpful as the semester progressed, for students' perceptions of their own and their peers' writing abilities had enormous influence on the work of the peer response group.

To determine who is placed in this basic writing class, all incoming students take a placement exam (a sixty-question objective test) that is

supposed to test overall facility with language. At the time of this study, students who scored below twenty were placed in basic writing. On the first day of class, students complete a writing sample; based on the instructor's assessment of their writing skills, they may be recommended to move to first-year composition. Based on those factors, my students, Mark, Paul, and Bob, stayed in basic writing.[1]

For their basic writing course, the students whom I taught were required to write seven essays. (The professor of our seminar group was also the basic writing instructor.) After writing their first drafts, they participated in a peer response session, which I facilitated, where they received oral feedback from the peer group. Then they revised their papers based on each other's suggestions and comments. The essays were then submitted to the professor, who gave each student additional feedback. This allowed the students to further revise their essays and learn as they progressed. This "loop" of events reinforced the idea that the writing process is recursive, not linear. It was helpful for the students to receive lots and lots of feedback.

In order to complete this study on trust among group members, I collected a variety of data. I read the students' first writing sample as "college writers." I also collected most of the essays written by my group, including first, second, and final drafts. I reviewed the drafts and looked for improvements and inconsistencies. I considered the relationship between these observations and my journal entries, which were kept over the entire course. As I reviewed their drafts, I noted which feedback came from the group members, from the writer, from me, or from the instructor. Journal entries that related to a specific writing piece and the English instructor's changing comments on their continually revised copies helped me to form fairly accurate judgments on their development. I also used an initial questionnaire that gave me some feedback about how they viewed themselves as writers as well as a final questionnaire to see how they felt about their development as writers and whether they thought the writing group had been helpful. I measured all activities against each writer's individual progress. I used this material to reflect on how they had developed and what problems were still common occurrences in the group.

WRITING ABILITIES AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUST

According to Rick Evans (1994), trust is an essential element in the peer writing group relationship. If students are to trust each other, Evans says,

their workshop meetings must allow members opportunities to get to know one another, provide an environment that feels safe and secure, promote feelings of "mutual dependence" and "shared involvement," and encourage a sense of community. Initially, the students seemed friendly to me and to each other. Since all of the group members felt that they had problems with organization in their written work, they seemed to have a common bond. However, tension occurred when members started to notice the level of difference in their writing abilities. They soon became self-conscious about their peers' response to their papers and about what they should say to each other. This led to discomfort, silence, and, at times, some evidence of hostility in the group.

I became aware of these differences in writing abilities early on in the semester, mainly from their writing samples, the questionnaires, my conversations with them, and from seeing their writing early on in the course. Mark was the strongest writer in the group. It is likely that Mark should have moved to the first-year class, but his ability didn't show itself in his writing sample. He was a very conscientious and serious student, but his early essays lacked organization. He initially wrote long papers with more than one focus topic and a lot of rambling in between central points. When I asked about his writing style, he recognized his problems. This was an important first step. He explained, "The biggest problem I have with my writing involves thought and organization." Basically, he didn't know where he was headed with most of his papers, so he would start in one direction and end in another, often going off on tangents along the way. This was perfectly fine for a rough draft, but for the final product he needed to learn techniques of organizational development. For example, early in the semester he wrote an opening paragraph that talked about his future in the Marine Corps. Then he went on about boot camp and later returned to his senior year of high school. This made his paper difficult to follow.

Bob initially limited his writing ability to a "frame" style, using a five-paragraph writing formula for every essay. At the beginning of the semester, Bob told me that he didn't know much about writing "good essays." He felt this way because he had a preconceived notion of how the essays were to sound and couldn't quite get his there. Bob found it difficult to write because he did not want to leave the comfort zone of the five-paragraph formula he had learned in high school. The instructor commented on one of his early essays that it was "too easy—your essay shows no tension, no human side, no exploration." This was com-

mon in most of his early writing pieces. Although he was initially self-conscious about his writing and nervous about peer feedback, he was the most willing to accept his peers' suggestions and to use them when revising his essays.

Paul was extremely unfocused, and he often underanalyzed crucial issues in his essays; therefore, he found it very difficult and frustrating to write. Initially, neither the instructor nor I knew that he had learning disabilities. On a questionnaire given at the beginning of the semester, he wrote that he had "a slight spelling disorder" and that "I don't really write very well at all." He said that he had earned a B in English his senior year at a Mennonite high school.

Paul had many difficulties and was the weakest writer of the group. When I asked him what he thought was his biggest problem with writing, he said, "I don't really write very well at all." He recognized that he had to search for ideas to write about, and he often forgot the purpose of his paper. Because he seldom read or wrote outside of school, he tended to run out of ideas and his writing sounded fake. Much more than Mark's, Paul's essays lacked focus and organization, and late in the semester he disclosed that he had ADHD. At the start of the semester, both Bob and Paul were clearly working below college level in their writing.

My students' varied writing abilities as well as their perceptions of themselves and each other negatively impacted our early peer group sessions. It seemed as though Paul knew that the others were better writers than he was, and this made it difficult for him to feel confident enough to offer suggestions about their writing. Mark wanted input from the group, but they appeared reluctant to comment because they viewed him as a "good writer." Often in the early sessions, Mark asked for comments but the others remained silent, looking at each other and me to give feed back. Usually, if I began the discussion, Paul and Bob would join in, but only to agree with my comments or add specific details to what I had already said. It was a rare occasion, especially early in the semester, when Paul or Bob submitted helpful feedback. Even when Mark asked specific questions in regard to a passage from his paper, they would give only very limited responses or tell him not to change it. I saw this as a common response, probably because Paul and Bob saw making changes as hard work, so they did not want to impose that writing process on a peer whose writing they admired. In addition, Mark had received an A on his first paper, while Paul and Bob had each received instructions to "rewrite." The group often felt that his essays didn't need further revision or help

exploring new ideas. The group sometimes helped him with organization or development, but they did this with reluctance and only as a result of my constant encouragement.

On the other hand, when Mark offered suggestions to Paul and Bob, they felt he was probably right and that his insight was valuable. Both young men would immediately jot notes and make changes to their papers. As I look over some of my past journal entries, I notice that never did either disagree with a suggestion of Mark's.

In their essay "Our Students' Experiences with Groups," Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans discuss the need to build trust in writing groups. Presenting "some of the ways our students experience their small response groups and some of the major challenges they face as they interact," they note "the challenges are often located in differences" (1994a, 50). For my students, the differences had to do with their varied writing abilities, or at least their perceptions of differences. As a result, instead of trusting the group members to help them solve their writing problems, each student felt he had to bring a "perfect" paper to the workshop session. As the peer group leader, I knew that perfection could not be their goal, that if they were to develop as writers, they needed feedback, and that building trust would be an important way to get them to open up and get their ideas out there. It became clear to me that if the group was going to help each other write more clearly organized and more fully developed essays, I would need to promote trust within the group or the process would not be successful.

BUILDING TRUST

To develop the kinds of conversations that would promote trust in my peer group, I borrowed from writing group theorists. Evans (1994) stresses the importance of on- and off-task conversation to develop this crucial trust among members, and together with his coauthors, Robert Brooke and Ruth Mirtz (1994a), he offers suggestions about warm-up and friendship-forming activities and strategies that can be used to help the students successfully negotiate the differences among them. At our first meeting, we got to know each other by talking about ourselves rather than our writing. In addition to early "get acquainted" activities, I had the group comment on all positive aspects of each paper before talking about what needed to be changed. This relaxed the writer, and once the ball was rolling, harsher criticisms from the group were not taken as defensively but were assumed to be a way of making good writing better.

One strategy that helped to build trust in the group members' suggestions came from Sandra W. Lawrence and Elizabeth Sommers's "From the Park Bench to the (Writing) Workshop Table: Encouraging Collaboration among Inexperienced Writers" (1996). Each student read his paper aloud and then everyone responded to it by writing what was good about the piece, what they liked and disliked, what confused them or needed further expansion. Then we discussed everyone's ideas. In this way, a lot of feedback was given to every writer, and they started to revise more actively when they had each other's comments to look at. Further, individual feedback was valued because everyone had something to say, and each member's opinion seemed to be valued more because it was personal, not just an extension of someone else's idea. In my log entry, I described the result: "This method worked really well and it allowed them to run the session more independently and productively." However, the differences in students' writing ability remained a central problem throughout the semester, and I developed particular strategies that helped to address the individual concerns of each group member.

Learning to trust was a two-way street for my group members. They had to develop confidence in other group members and they had to believe that they could trust themselves to offer significant comments. In the case of Mark, it seemed to be more difficult for him to trust the others' suggestions, and they were certainly more hesitant to offer advice when it came to Mark's essays. It therefore became necessary that they understand the different roles they could play in the writing group. Emphasizing the importance of talk for student writers, Michael Kleine's "What Freshmen Say—and Might Say—to Each Other about Their Own Writing"(1985) describes four particular kinds of verbal response that should be promoted in peer workshops. Kleine suggests that group members respond (1) as evaluators to find surface-level or formal criticisms; (2) as immediate readers by giving extended suggestions about content and clarity; (3) as helpful listeners to help the writer brainstorm additional ideas; and (4) as a role-playing audience serving remote readers outside of the group and the teacher. In Kleine's view, all four kinds of talk are necessary and should take place at various appropriate moments during any workshop session.

I used the ideas from Kleine's article to explain that it wasn't always necessary to find things to change; they could also find things they liked and build on those ideas. The peer group could be used to further blossoming ideas. Within two sessions, they picked up on this point, and this set us in

a new direction early in the semester. Everyone had something to say and everyone could trust each other's ideas of "development," not "corrections." In a later interview, when I asked Mark if he had been helped in any way by the peer group, he said, "Yeah. I get my ideas down on paper first and then I go back and organize them into a well-developed paper from the input of my group." Mark could see that the results of peer input were positive: the English instructor commented on his paper, which was revised by the group, saying, "You have done a remarkable job of taking a complex issue and systematically examining the arguments—this paper is as good as it can be." In respect to Mark, my students came to see that they could make good suggestions so that Mark could benefit from what they had to offer. In this way, they learned to trust themselves and, using Kenneth Bruffee's term, to view themselves as "knowledgeable peers."

Because Bob had a negative view of his writing ability, he was more open to suggestions, especially from Mark, so developing trust was not as difficult for him as it was for the other writers. In the first month of working with his peer group, he established a good working relationship with Mark, whom he viewed as a superior writer. Stay, whose article builds upon Robert Zoellner's work on the benefits of conversation for composition students, asserts that since basic writers are often better at talking than at writing, "talking helps unskilled writers to formulate and clarify their ideas while they gain confidence" (1985, 248). In our workshop sessions, we helped Bob reword his ideas and expand on his thoughts so that his essays were much less formulaic. This greatly improved his papers and his writing style. After one of the peer sessions, I interviewed him about the changes that he had made in his essay and asked if his new way of thinking about the ideas for his essay had emerged during the peer group meeting. He replied that he had a better handle on how to organize his information now that he had talked the ideas over with the other members of his group. Bob commented that he trusted the input of the group members because their feedback was always helpful in developing his papers, so that he didn't have to "rewrite" each one for a grade. He said, "The group really helps to get my ideas organized and put into writing. I have a very hard time trying to put my words onto paper so that all the readers know what I'm trying to say."

On the following paper, he showed us that he had earned an A. His papers became full of ideas. He had clear statements, supporting ideas, and nicely developed paragraphs, and his personality began to shine through in his writing. With notable changes in his development and

style of writing, his papers were more interesting for his specific audience, including his peers, his instructor, and me. The last paper that we reviewed together also received an A. He had a few grammatical errors, but his essay had good structure with meaningful support. At the bottom of his paper, the instructor had written, "You've come a long way." I had to agree. I believe that Bob's willingness to trust his peer group was key to his progress. Rather than trying to bring a "perfect" draft to the workshop, he took more time on his later papers because he wanted them to be good, and he knew that he could count on the help of his group to shape his essay so that he expressed what he wanted it to say.

Helping the group to deal effectively with Paul's writing and helping Paul to trust and consider his peers' suggestions was probably the most challenging aspect of my work as a peer group leader. At the beginning of the semester, Paul's drafts were very difficult for the group to understand, as this early introduction reveals:

> Well, this past summer a very defining event happened when I was chosen to be on staff at a summer camp. It was my first year on staff but I had been a camper for the past nine years. The summer brought many interesting challenges and problems that I had to deal with. The one that sticks out in my mind the most was as follows: At the beginning of the week the campers fill out information forms so staff knows a little bit about them. All of mine checked out fine. Tuesday night I was covering someone's supper table and one of the campers was crying her head off. I asked her what happened but she didn't say a word. I then asked her friend what happened and she told me that this girl (Becky) had just gotten a letter in the mail from her mom.

The introduction continued on for several more lines, and its lack of focus was evident to the group. It seemed as though Paul was wandering around trying to find something to write, and, as a result, his peer group members were unable to offer him meaningful feedback. When Paul finally disclosed that he had a learning disability, he took a gradual step toward developing peer trust. He showed that he felt comfortable sharing a personal characteristic with the group, and the group was in turn sensitive to this. Also, learning about Paul's ADHD was useful to me as the group leader as I tried to promote trust among these students who had such different writing styles and such different peer group needs. I now knew that Paul would need more specific feedback from the group on fewer content areas. I was able to model this type of feedback late in the semester by choosing only one or two things to work on for the next

paper, such as a topic sentence and good transitions as a focus point for the next few sessions, while for the other members, I usually gave two or three suggestions to focus on at each session. Soon Mark and Bob began to realize that when reading Paul's papers they should focus on the major problems, such as paragraph organization and thought completion, not the details that could be corrected with more careful revision.

For Paul, peer group collaboration was the main ingredient in developing trust. I would usually ask Paul to explain the point of his paper before he began to read it aloud to the group. If he could tell us what it was about in a sentence or two, he could usually develop a focus for his paper that the group could attempt to follow. If he could not specifically state his topic or point, then the group helped him to develop a thesis. From there, the group could also help him develop each paragraph and make it support the thesis.

Asking the group to comment on the positive aspects of his paper before moving on to the problems was especially important to Paul, and the group sessions became a big part of his revision process. In particular, the group suggested ways of forming solid introductory paragraphs, which seemed to contribute to improvements in his focus and organization at the same time. By the middle of the semester, with help from his group, Paul was writing introductions like the following:

> As I walk through the front door of my Aunt Bert's house in Harrisburg PA, I see many things. I see a big grandfather clock that has been in the family for many years, an oak table in the dining room that is loaded with food, a big screen television set with Sony Playstation hooked up to it. I also see a many number of people. I see Adrienne, who came all the way from New York, Brian who came all the way from Italy and occasionally a stranger or two. With all of these people gathered for one big party, there are a countless number of presents. The thing I look forward to most during the whole year is our family tradition on Christmas Day.

The instructor commented positively on this introduction, saying, "Great opening, Paul. This tour of the family invited your reader to travel along." I agreed that his strong introduction led to a much more sophisticated and detailed essay.

Unfortunately, overcoming his own self-doubts and distrust of the group process came too late for Paul, and his writing did not develop to the extent that the other members' did. Although Paul's writing showed a fair amount of improvement over the semester, his writing never achieved

the level I had hoped for him. If I had I known about his learning disabilities earlier in the semester, I might have used a different approach. I could have shown him ways to organize his papers in stages, a strategy we tried to develop toward the end of the semester, instead of going all out in one sitting. I could have guided the group in providing more helpful suggestions for him, but Paul was wary about sharing this information with his peer group members or me, probably because he doubted acceptance.

I also found it interesting that Paul was the least likely to use the advice from the workshop when he revised his papers. This might have been because he could not remember exactly what he was told or because he didn't know how to integrate the suggestions. However, Stay stresses that students whose writing has been evaluated as "deficient" may feel "social and psychological pressures" that make them reluctant to resee and revise what they have written (1985, 249). In either case, it suggests that some issues of trust cannot be easily resolved, even when the peer group seems to be functioning productively. Also, it is crucial to take writing disabilities into account during workshop time, as would be done with any other subject.

Finally, my position as the peer group leader also played an instrumental role in the relationship among group members. As Karen Spear explains, students in peer groups will often take up the teacher's role rather than offer advice to each other as peer readers (1988, 54–57), and when there is a peer group leader, this is even more likely to occur. My peer group members wanted to transfer all the authority to me. In order to stay away from this role and give responsibility back to the students, to encourage them to trust each other as well as me, I simply accepted every member's initial suggestions and then pushed them to clarify and develop their ideas and suggestions in the workshop. Because I did not want to be viewed as the "expert," I liked having everyone equally contributing. Offering my insight and suggestions along with the suggestions of the peer group members contributed to their self-confidence and to their trust in each other as writers and readers. They began to see that all the writing in their essays was not merely corrections from the teacher, but group and self input that ultimately improved their writing.

After all my peer group had learned about enhanced communication and learning to critique and accept criticism, the biggest factor in developing trust within the group was maturation over the semester. In order to build a higher, more intense level of trust and therefore a greater

degree of productivity, the three men had to mature into their new role, a college role, in which they learned to be proud of what they wrote and learned to make others feel confident and accepting in their own writing ability. When each student learned how to give and accept suggestions, this showed me that they trusted the input coming from the other members. This trust eventually led to peer-dominated sessions, rather than teacher-dominated or peer group leader–dominated sessions.

PEER GROUP LEADERS AND THE QUESTION OF TRUST

Although my group consisted of only three students, all male and all from similar educational backgrounds in central Pennsylvania, this small study of one peer group shows that collaborative peer feedback can help basic writers. Each of my students benefited individually by gaining an understanding of their specific problems as writers and learning how to develop their skills individually. They also learned how to revise together as a group so that every member had a stronger paper. They found techniques they liked and didn't like, but they developed a style that worked for them and their audience. This is important for all writers.

This was a useful study for me as a future teacher because it gave me an insider's look at the development of basic writers as they learn from peers, leaders, and instructors. Working as a peer group leader has given me new knowledge of the writing processes of basic writers. I have also become more conscious of the difficulties basic writers face and why these difficulties occur. In my group, peer group leader intervention was important for building the kind of trust that sustained a positive and progressive learning environment. There was a lot of on-task talk and some off-task talk in my group, but, for the most part, everyone left feeling as though he had been heard. Once the trust was established and ideas were flowing, the three students could have easily worked in a collaborative group without a leader. When I talked to the other group leaders, however, they told me that trust was not a constant consideration in their groups, and that this might be why their groups were not as coherent or helpful for the students.

My experience with peer group writing sheds new light on the ways in which teachers should consider peer group organization. In conversations with my instructor when the semester ended, I learned that many instructors experiment with different peer group configurations. In our class that semester, our teacher chose to place a strong, middle, and weak writer together. My research on trust and writing abilities in peer groups

leads me to believe that teachers must be more cognizant of the way they organize groups. With different levels of writing abilities, students are seemingly less trusting of the peer response situation. But I can also confidently say that peer group leaders can mediate in these kinds of situations to engender trust and create a positive peer response environment.

The positive effects of peer group collaboration have been well researched by many scholars. Hopefully, this project will contribute to ongoing research by giving teachers and students a greater understanding of how a peer group leader can build trust and thus enhance the productivity of writing group response. The peer group's small size and comfort level nurtured honest conversation. Whether students like group work or not, sharing and developing ideas with others is a significant way to develop their roles as communicators for life, learning to write by writing and collaborating.