Laurie Grobman

BUILDING BRIDGES TO ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: THE PEER GROUP LEADER IN BASIC WRITING PEER RESPONSE GROUPS

ABSTRACT: *The academic discourse paradigm locates the basic writer outside academic discourse, lacking the authority academic writers possess. This exclusion is manifested in peer response groups, where basic writers often shy away from critiquing substantive issues of content or organization in each other's work. This article describes a study of writing groups which attempted to build the bridges between basic writers and academic writers by incorporating a peer group leader – a sophomore student who guides basic writers – into peer response sessions. The peer group leader straddles the roles of the two primary types of peer collaboration in basic writing – peer response in basic writing classrooms and peer tutorials in Writing Centers – and thus draws from the advantages of both. This article analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of this project and its implications for the further use of peer group leaders in basic writing.*

David Bartholomae's landmark essays "Inventing the University" and "Writing on the Margins: The Concept of Literacy in Higher Education" locate the basic writer outside academic discourse, lacking the authority academic writers possess. This exclusion is manifested, among other ways, in peer response groups, where basic writers often shy away from critiquing substantive issues of content or organization in each other's work. Their hesitancy is understandable, given that the university has told them (by virtue of their placement in a "remedial" writing course) that they do not know how to write. In this article, I will describe a study of writing groups in which I attempted to build the bridges between basic writers and academic writers by incorporating a *peer group leader* — a sophomore student who guides basic writers during peer response sessions — in an electronic classroom with online

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peer response sessions.[1] I hypothesized that efficacy of peer response would increase, expecting that the peer group leader would be able to provide a bridge between basic writers' and academic communities, enabling basic writers to model academic discourse as they authorize themselves as participants.

The theoretical support for peer response groups in composition is by now well known: social theories of language and learning suggest that students should construct meaning not in isolation but within the context of social interaction. Although the use of peer response groups is common practice in writing classrooms, research on peer response groups offers mixed reviews, largely because students typically lack the skills and knowledge for peer response (see Zhu). Indeed, much of the research on writing groups focuses on ways to promote more effective, substantive response in students (see Zhu) and on the causes and characteristics of successful and unsuccessful peer response groups (see Bishop). Furthermore, a great deal of this research focuses on composition rather than basic writing students.

Nevertheless, Bartholomae's work with basic writers has led many researchers and instructors, including myself, to use peer response groups as a way to empower basic writers (Weaver 31). Basic writing pedagogy emerging from social constructivist views of writing encourages students to see their written texts as part of academic discourse, a larger conversation taking place in writing. This approach presupposes, as do I, that developmental writers can produce intelligent writing if instructors challenge them with serious content and enable them to enter academic conversations. Peer response groups are one means through which students can potentially enter these conversations.

However, Wei Zhu notes that the opportunities for peer interaction offered by peer response groups often go unfulfilled (517). Though many factors influence peer response group efficacy and inefficacy, group members' lack of confidence in peers' expertise and members' fear in offering criticism are among the most salient characteristics of peer response group failure (Bishop 121). Clearly, these problems are more pronounced for basic writers, whose reluctance and/or inability to offer substantive critique hinders meaningful learning from knowledgeable peers. Basic writers' precarious position as outsiders in the academic community and subsequent lack of confidence in their own writing abilities lead these students to shy away from assuming any measure of authority in offering meaningful response. Basic writers tend to resist honest and authoritative critique, even in electronic classrooms which otherwise contribute to community-building (see Gay; Varone).

Zhu points out that while a significant amount of research on peer response centers on its benefits to students, less research examines the factors that influence peer interaction (518). My project incor-

porating a peer group leader in basic writing peer response groups sought to examine such conditions. I attempted to make writing groups more effective in basic writing classrooms based on what I knew of the research in this area as well as my experiences with writing groups and basic writers. Rather than give in to what Sandra Lawrence and Elizabeth Sommers conclude about instructors' doubts about the value of peer response groups for inexperienced writers, I sought to find ways to make this experience meaningful and valuable. Moreover, I sought to promote writing groups in which basic writers, like their composition counterparts, reconceptualize substantive issues in their writing, countering Joan Wauters' claim that for basic writers, "there is an excellent rationale for offering only positive reinforcement, if the goal is to encourage confidence on the part of reluctant writers" (157). Basic writers should be treated as intellectuals learning a new discourse, and peer response sessions should reflect such academic work. By making academic discourse visible through the use of a peer group leader, I could help students in their understanding and appropriation of academic discourse.[2]

This article describes and analyzes how I used a peer group leader to provide a bridge between basic writers and academic discourse. I strongly believe in the *potential* of peer group leaders in basic writing classrooms. In this article, I hope to convey that potential by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of what happened in my classroom in the context of peer collaboration research and theory. While my study can not cover the range and variety of basic writing classroom situations and dynamics, it does raise significant issues that beg further research and practice. In the remainder of the article, I discuss the theoretical basis for the use of peer group leaders, turn next to the experiences in my classroom, and end with my conclusions about the present and future of peer group leaders in basic writing.

Building Bridges in Peer Collaboration Research: Peer Group Leaders in Basic Writing

Using limited funds from an internal grant, I selected one student as the peer group leader for my basic writing class.[3] I theorized that peer group leaders, who have only recently become academic writers themselves, could constitute a bridge between basic writers' and academic communities. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky suggest we "engage students in a process whereby they discover academic discourse from the inside" (36). Peer group leaders make academic discourse's inside visible, so basic writing students do not have to invent it blindly. At once insiders and outsiders, peer group leaders provide a vital link between writer and audience, writer and academic

discourse. As James Gee argues, discourses are mastered by "enculturation into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (qtd. in Zhu 518). Straddling the fence somewhere between academic and basic writers' communities, this young woman could, I hoped, provide the scaffolding and supported interaction upon and through which basic writers would enter academic discourse. In so doing, peer group leaders provide what Kenneth Bruffee would call a "conversation" to model or what subscribers to the competing model of academic authority would see as a means to challenge it. In both cases, peer group leaders could aid basic writers' appropriation of academic discourse.

I chose a student I had known from my basic writing class a year earlier. She was among the strongest writers in my class (and I knew she had been successful in English Composition), but more importantly, I felt she had characteristics that would suit the peer group leader role: leadership, integrity, maturity, and sensitivity. Tyisha, the peer group leader, attended my class during peer response sessions, joining one or two groups and guiding them through and participating in response.[4] I instructed her to be descriptive and to pay attention to global issues of meaning, content, and organization rather than mechanical issues in students' writing. I expected Tyisha to model these responses for students as well as guide them to suitable modes of critique. Additionally, I informed students that they could seek the peer group leader's help outside of class as well, through email or phone calls.

The peer group leader thus straddled the roles of the two primary types of peer collaboration in basic writing: peer response in basic writing classrooms and peer tutorials in Writing Centers. I envisioned the peer group leader as a mediary between peers in a peer response group and tutors in Writing Center tutorials, and I believed that by bringing the peer tutor *into* not only the classroom, but the peer response group, I would be able to draw at once from the advantages of both peer response groups and peer tutorials. Of course, there is a flip side as well, for peer group leaders have the potential to degrade the collaboration of peers in peer response groups.

Muriel Harris' widely-known and respected work on the similarities and differences between peer tutorials and peer response, though now seven years old, remains a significant contribution to the study and practice of these important collaborative methods in basic writing classrooms. Harris asserts that both writing center tutorials and peer response groups are "collaborative learning about writing" ("Collaboration" 369) in which "one writer claims ownership and makes all final decisions" (370); moreover, the goal of the tutor and peer group members is the same: "all are working toward more effective writing abilities and heightened awareness of general writing concerns" (373).

Bringing peer group leaders into peer response sessions leaves these important general similarities unchanged.

It is the distinctions Harris makes, however, which interest me more in the context of peer group leaders, particularly in terms of how the peer group leader can take advantage of these distinctions and become a force in basic writers' peer response sessions and meaningful learning in collaboration with knowledgeable peers. Among the most significant of these differences is the widely-accepted view that peer tutors in writing tutorials become "neither a teacher nor a peer" as they assist writers with writing issues beyond "fixing" a particular paper under consideration while peer response readers focus on and critique a specific draft (371). Peer tutors explain issues and problems and give instructional assistance. As Stephen North notes, the tutor's job " is to produce better writers, not just better writing" (qtd. in Harris 372). In tutorials, tutors individualize and personalize the concerns, while in peer response groups, readers offer mutual assistance in a back-and-forth interaction that deals with general skills (373).

Peer group leaders take on both roles, neither teachers, peer tutors, nor peers, straddling multiple communities as they join the peer response group. In their unique role, peer group leaders can bring individualization to peer response groups since they do not have writing to be critiqued and do not seek mutual assistance. This difference from other members of the peer response group allows for an additional layer of instruction in peer response groups, beyond a focus on the writing under scrutiny to more general writing concerns, including instructional assistance on *how to respond to peers' writing*, which the tutorial lacks. Learning the nuances of critique can in and of itself lead to improved writing abilities. Thus, Harris' assertion that peer tutors' methods and concerns for uncovering writers' problems are not appropriate for peer response groups no longer holds when we introduce peer group leaders into peer response groups. Peer group leaders can individualize response, and, more importantly, can lead students away from purely directive response.

Harris' distinction in terms of collaboration is important in this context. She argues that peer response groups are closer to collaborative writing (i.e. joint authorship) than writing tutorials, for peer response group work emphasizes informing, while writing tutorials emphasize the student's own discovery ("Collaboration" 377). On first glance, it may seem that using a peer group leader might move the peer response group away from collaborative writing, since peer group leaders do emphasize students' own discovery. However, peer group leaders can simultaneously increase the level and quality of informative modes. Peer group leaders raise peer response beyond simple informing on specific issues, a goal of many instructors who use peer response groups, despite Harris' claim that these groups tend to be

prescriptive (see Benesch; Zhu; Bishop). Peer group leaders guide group members into larger, substantive issues and thus students' own discovery of the writing process. Moreover, unlike tutorials, peer response groups with peer group leaders also facilitate students' discovery of group processes; that is, peer group leaders guide and model peer group response and critique, so students discover not only their own writing issues, but how to benefit from and contribute to peer response. In peer response work with peer group leaders, basic writing students not only attempt to critique their peers' draft but themselves learn about the possibilities for revision in the process. Therefore, despite the potential to undermine collaboration among peers, peer group leaders can enhance it by raising the efficacy of peer group members' informing *and* multiple layers of discovery.

In their multiple roles, peer group leaders thus provide a bridge between what Thomas Newkirk calls peers' and instructors' distinct "evaluative communities" (309). His study suggests that peer response groups may reinforce students' abilities to write for their peers but not the academic community, and, subsequently, that "students need practice applying the criteria that they are now learning" and should be viewed as "apprentices, attempting to learn and apply criteria appropriate to an academic audience" (310). Newkirk argues for teachers' active role in peer response; however, I believe peer group leaders can more effectively "mak[e] the norms of that community clear and plausible — even appealing" (310). Ideally, peer response enables students to enter academic discourse through working with knowledgeable peers, breaking free from one evaluative community to enter another, and it empowers students who do not see themselves as academic writers. However, in practice, students' crossover is more problematic. Peer group leaders can expose students to the conventions — appealing and not-so-appealing — of academic discourse. Peer group leaders, though, do not impose on students what Benesch calls the "teacher's code," but instead allow them to respond to writing issues in "their own language" (90), since peer group leaders have, in Harris' words, "a foot in each discourse community" (380). With the use of peer group leaders, therefore, basic writers develop this language more independently of the teacher and in collaboration with peers.

Using peer group leaders in peer response groups also bridges what Tim Hacker describes as the two main approaches to peer response: the broad categories of "teacher-directed" and "modeling." The former category includes teacher intervention in the form of worksheets (a set of heuristics for approaching an essay) and/or instructions on how to proceed, while "modeling" consists of teacher intervention prior to actual student-directed peer response sessions through teaching students how to evaluate and critique their peers' essays before peer response sessions. Using peer group leaders, how-

ever, reduces the need for teacher intervention in either model.[5] That is, with peer group leaders, students can "model" effective response, but they do so in-process, and they do not need a set of heuristics provided by the instructor. Moreover, with peer group leaders, more authentic collaboration occurs because peer response groups remain decentered. Students cannot blindly invent the language of academic discourse, but peer group leaders make its inside visible. With peer group leaders as facilitators, basic writers take on a more active role in the invention of academic discourse. Like peer tutors, peer group leaders can empower student writers who "want to have power over their environment, to be in control of what happens to them, . . . and manipulate language the way their teachers do before they will be able to play the academic game the way the insiders do" (Hawkins 64).

Harris makes the further point that students in peer tutorials typically trust peer tutors and have confidence in their skills and knowledge. Students' perception of the peer group leader is also an important component of the peer group leader's usefulness in peer response groups. For peer response to work, peer group members must have confidence in their peers' knowledge. However, for basic writers especially, trust in peers' knowledge is suspect, mainly because they have been designated as underprepared for college writing. Peer group leaders can play a significant role in leading basic writers to see themselves and their peers as knowledgeable, skilled writers. Moreover, because peer group leaders can pass their knowledge to basic writing students, they more evenly distribute knowledge in the classroom. As a result, the classroom becomes a more authentic decentered, collaborative learning environment, in practice as well as in theory.

While peer group leaders can bring the advantages of both peer response groups and peer tutorials to their roles in peer response sessions, they may also degrade peer response. Harris points out that because peer tutors are more acquainted with academic discourse than the tutees, "the further they are from being peers in a collaborative relationship" ("Collaboration" 379). Students come to them seeking prescriptives, thereby making it difficult for tutors to remain collaborators rather than co-authors and frustrating both student and tutor (379). Certainly the potential exists as well when we bring peer group leaders to peer response groups. Peer group leaders, straddling both the basic writers' and academic communities, are not completely "equal" to other peer group members. Without writing of their own "out there" and under scrutiny, peer group leaders have less at stake than the other peer group members. Harris makes the point that the peer tutor's unique position as interpreter of academic jargon is in peril if the tutor, "enamored of the jargon of the field, moves too far into the teacher's world" (380). Clearly, this risk of co-authoring and co-opting student writing exists with peer group leaders in peer response groups,

but can be minimized with effective training and guidance.

Relatedly, peer group leaders may interfere with what Harris identifies as peer response groups' give-and-take process of negotiation that leads to consensus about how the group will undertake peer response (374). With the peer group leader's participation in peer response, the negotiation between students will likely be less democratic, for part of the peer group leader's role is to help guide students to specific kinds of response. Moreover, as in tutorials, the tutor's and students' goals may often conflict, since students want particular papers fixed while the tutor attempts to address larger issues (374-75). Clearly, if students have the goal of fixing a particular piece of writing in their peer response group, they may find themselves in conflict with the peer group leader who will be guiding them to more global issues as well. On the other hand, since peer response groups with peer group leaders can effectively address both specific and general writing concerns, the conflicts between students and peer group leader are likely to be reduced.

Harris' identification of the tutor's "unique advantage of being both a nonjudgmental, non-evaluative helper — a collaborator in whom the writer can confide" (376) — cannot be ignored when we bring the peer group leader into peer response. Arguably, the peer group leader may face difficult hurdles in getting group members to perceive him/her as non-evaluative and non-judgmental, given the peer group leader's connection to the instructor. Instructors can make it clear to students that the peer group leader is there to offer assistance, not to evaluate or judge them. Instructors can also inform students that even though they will consult with the peer group leader throughout the semester (much like peer tutors in Writing Centers confer with instructors), the peer group leader will not be involved in grading the students in any way. In my class, students' participation in peer response did influence their grades to some degree, but it was my assessment of the logged transcripts of the sessions, not anything the peer group leader told me, that affected my evaluation of students' participation in this process. Although I do not think I was able to completely overcome my students' association of the peer group leader with myself, I believe they did come to see her as non-evaluative, enabling her to evoke honest and authoritative response.

Building Bridges to Academic Discourse: The Peer Group Leader in Basic Writing

How well did using a peer group leader work in my class? What advantages and/or disadvantages did this young woman bring to basic writers' peer response groups? In the following pages, I offer my

analyses of the peer group sessions. Since most of our response sessions occurred online, I was able to use these transcripts to monitor and assess the peer group leader's effectiveness in leading students to substantive response.[6] I hope to suggest, finally, that this study has significant implications for further research and practice using peer group leaders as a bridge to academic discourse for basic writers.

In the basic writing class under study, I challenged students with difficult work, connecting content with methodology as we studied varied aspects and definitions of literacy, each assignment building off the others so that the writing assignments, as Berthoff suggests, "encourage conscientization, the discovery of the mind in action" so students "learn . . . how meanings make future meanings possible, how form finds further form" (755). Moreover, class content, focused on academic literacy itself, wedded content with methodology and put discourse at the center of analysis. Thus, course content and methodology began the process through which basic writers could enter academic discourse. The peer group leader helped these students make this difficult leap, as the following examples demonstrate. At the same time, however, her work illuminates some of the potential perils of peer group leaders in basic writers' peer response.

One strength of the peer group leader was her ability to both inform and model. In the following example, Tyisha, the peer group leader, guides students away from mechanical issues, without specifically instructing them not to consider such surface features.

> Stan: yo Paul i guess you read my review
> Paul: yup
> Paul: it was good
> Stan: good content
> Paul: yes
> Stan: i found it very interesting
> Paul: but I found a lot of little mistakes
> Paul: did you catch any?
> Tyisha: I liked your paper also Stan, it was really good, Paul is there anything in his paper that you thought he could work on, besides a few spelling mistakes.

Tyisha's language effectively downplays "a few spelling mistakes" and re-focuses students' attention to more substantive issues, without specifying what these should be. This exchange demonstrates Tyisha's ability to simultaneously focus on the essay under consideration while leading students to discovery.

In the next example, Tyisha successfully keeps the group focused and elicits effective critique.

Tyisha: what can he do about that 5th paragraph
Stan: break it up
Tyisha: It is too big- break it up how?
Stan: hold on i have to read it again to get that answer
Paul: I think I could break it up at the word people
Larry: LEHIGH IS BETTER THAN BERK
Paul: yea yea
Tyisha: Larry we're having a discussion
Paul: Larry is the man
Stan: ok i just want to get to main sooooooooooo i don't really care
Stan: but berks has more that one building and we have a guy
Paul: that really doesn't bother me
Tyisha: Anyways, what can we do with this para. lets get back on track
Tyisha: just 5 more minutes
Paul: I could break it up at the word "people"
Tyisha: Good and from there what could he do Stan
Stan: that is what i was just about to say
Stan: back up the ideas in greater detail
Tyisha: should he change the intro. sentence to that paragraph or keep it the same.
Stan: just make sure you have good transition between the two paragraphs
Paul: ok
Stan: yep.......change the intro

When Larry interrupts Paul's and Stan's academic conversation, Tyisha takes a leadership role, trying to get them back on track. Though Stan momentarily gives in to Larry's disruptions, he does re-focus his attention on the task. This is an important example of the peer group leader's potential role, for all too often, basic writers get off track—and stay there. Although Tim Hacker claims that students in writing groups tend to take on the role of teacher, I rarely see this occur with basic writers. It is difficult for these students to get back on track on their own, perhaps afraid to take on such a leadership role, questioning their own authority as writers.

Furthermore, the above exchange also illuminates the ways in which the peer group leader can simultaneously focus on a particular piece of writing and more global writing instruction. Even though Tyisha and the peer group members are discussing Paul's essay, Tyisha's comments are directed at Stan, the responder. Paul's comment that "I could break it up at the word 'people'" and Stan's comment that "that is what I was just about to say" indicate their understanding of both how to "fix" this particular paragraph and its appli-

cability to issues of paragraphing generally.

Similarly, the following exchange also illuminates the peer group leader's ability to straddle the roles of tutor and peer, focusing on specific and general concerns.

> Sara: In some of the papers I write, I start out with a question
> Tyisha: so how does this help Joes paper
> Tyisha: what idea do you have for Joe that he could use with a question in his paper
> Sara: He could have started out with "What is Technical Literacy?"
> Tyisha: and then what could he have done in his intro to support this?
> Joe: why would I want to start with a question that I don't know the answer to?
> . . .
> Sara: Explain how many definitions it had and use each definition to start a new paragraph
> Tyisha: good point how would you answer that, you went right to the point in your starting paragraph.
> . . .
> Sara: Joe what do you say?
> Joe: The point that I am attempting to say is that I do not know the exact definitions.
> Sara: Did you try looking them up?
> Joe: no, because we are suppose to find our own.

Sara begins this exchange over Joe's introductory paragraph by pointing to her own strategy for introductions. Tyisha then pushes her to apply it to Joe's essay. Despite Joe's disagreement, Tyisha effectively guides these students to consider not only Joe's essay but a particular rhetorical strategy more generally. Sara and Joe debate the issue in academic terms, Joe responding that "looking it up" is not what academic discourse is about. Instead, Joe realizes the role he must play as a knowledge-maker.

The following example demonstrates an impressive interchange of substantive ideas between Tyisha, Jennifer, and Stan that occurred fairly late in the semester. Jennifer begins by asking both her peer and the peer group leader for response:

> Jennifer: Tyisha, do you think I stay on track or do I drift off my topic?
> Jennifer: Also, do you think my thesis is okay, or more like what do you think my thesis is?
> Jennifer: Stan, give me some input. What do I need to change?

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Remember I did this late last night.

Stan: well you talk about culture and beliefs and than you jump to standard english. It just needs something to blend the idea that even though a person likes to keep their beliefs that they still need standard english.

Tyisha: Your paper is very good however, Stan can you identify Jennifers thesis, and does it go along with her paper.

Tyisha directs Jennifer and Stan to consider a particular problem in Jennifer's essay, the lack of a clear thesis/focus, specifically responding to Jennifer's request for help but in the process guiding Stan to respond. The discussion continues:

Stan: well I think it can be improved upon. I really did not understand what the article was going to be about when I read it.

Jennifer: I think I am still talking about Standard English. I throw in culture and beliefs because that is why people stray from Standard English, it is so they can keep close to their culture.

Tyisha: Okay, so then how does all this information tie in to Rachel Jones facing disadvantages-what do you think Stan.

Jennifer: I don't understand. Didn't I introduce my thesis in the opening? I thought I made it clear what I was talking about, but I could be wrong.

Tyisha: Your thesis should be in the introductory paragraph last sentence before you get into your supporting paragraphs.

Jennifer: I used Rachel Jones because I like how she expresses that people are faced with disadvantages without speaking Standard English.

Tyisha presses Stan to help Jennifer with this problem of purpose and simultaneously propels Jennifer into thoughtful consideration of her rhetorical choices. Even though Jennifer notes, as a writer questioning her own authority, that "I could be wrong," she continues to explain the reasoning behind her own understanding of her thesis and its placement in the essay. Tyisha's presence has helped this basic writer gain confidence in her own and her peer's knowledge and writing. The conversation concludes this way:

Stan: try adding something like this; Standard english pulls from cultural independence. Some people feel that without there cultural distinction they will be lost. For a person to truly accelerate in our society they must have a little of both. Cultural diversity is not acceptable in todays world and for a per-

son to not understand or use standard english they will be
lost.
Jennifer: so, she was my spark for this paper. I am responding
and giving my idea of her views.
. . .
Tyisha: It's good you used Jones however, what is your thesis,
is it that last sentence, because if so then you could talk about
the things SHE FACED, I think it could be the 2nd and 3rd sen-
tences combined, how do you feel Stan.
Stan: well I wrote what I think it should be
Jennifer: thanks Stan, I like that response you gave me previ-
ously. I wrote it down because I like it a lot.

Tyisha's membership in the academic community is evidenced
by her stronger, more nuanced reading of Rachel Jones' essay, "What's
Wrong With Black English?" and her clearer sense of how to respond
to an outside reading in one's essay. She prods Jennifer into a deeper
reading in a way that both models and guides Jennifer and Stan in the
conventions of academic discourse. Benesch argues that peer response
is often disconnected — that is, utterances are left suspended, other com-
ments are raised, and an emerging conversation rarely materializes
(93). With the aid of Tyisha, we see a substantive conversation emerge
(temporarily interrupted by the lag time inherent in online synchro-
nous conversations) because Tyisha enables them to "enter *imperfectly*
into peer group conversations" (Benesch 93, emphasis mine), as Stan's
misstatement that "Cultural diversity is not acceptable" indicates. In-
deed, Stan's rewriting of Jennifer's introductory paragraph (which
shows his own sense of authority as a knowledgeable peer) illumi-
nates the perils of peer response generally. I would like to believe that
peer group leaders could lessen the impact of such difficulties, though
admittedly, Tyisha did not "catch" it this time.

The above examples and analysis point to the strengths of peer
group leaders in basic writers' peer response, but there were some pit-
falls as well. Mainly, these occurred when the peer group leader be-
came overly prescriptive, as the following two examples demonstrate:

Stan: overall the paper was good. Some things that need to be
worked on is unity. Also what is that delta 9 stuff about.
Stan: is that the code for the tetrahydrocannabinal
Paul: yea
Tyisha: define cannabis in your paper so your reader knows
what it is.
Paul: ok

Tyisha: what can Joe do to make his first sentence sound interesting?
Tom: Joe could tell the reader what his point of view is
Tyisha: yes or he could also do what
Tyisha: where are you Joe
Tom: he could state what the controversy is
Joe: I don't want to include my opinion in the beginning because I was writing from a non-bias point of viewpoint
Tyisha: Tom, do you think you would pick up an article like Joe's why or why not?
. . .
Tom: I would because in reading the first sentence I want to know what the controversy is
. . .
Tyisha: Joe your paper is good, just work on making the introductory sentence sound appealing to the reader, by having a sentence like, As I looked into the subject of cultural diversity, I noticed how it was such a controversial topic.

There are probably a number of reasons why instances such as these occurred, beginning with Harris' identification of peer tutors' tendency to become "enamored of" their more authoritative role (380). There were times when I observed Tyisha reveling in her role as more knowledgeable, and why not? She was a former basic writer, and her work as a peer group leader by its very nature indicated how far she had come. At the same time, like peer tutors, Tyisha was still very much a part of her peers' community, only one year ahead of them in school, as her comments from various peer response sessions reveal: "what can Paul do to make his paper more personal to his audience"; "Maybe in your intro you could mention that there are bad effects of weed"; "Let's flip to Paul's [essay]"; and "you're a nut Paul." In the first comment, Tyisha uses academic terminology ("audience"), though somewhat awkwardly. In the second sentence, her use of the word "weed," rather than the more formal "marijuana" (as I would call it), discloses her ties to basic writers' community. The final two comments also reveal her connection-as-peer with the basic writers in my class.

I also believe that Tyisha was genuinely concerned about the writers in my class, and she wanted to help them improve their essays and get good grades, perhaps losing sight of her alternate roles. Her impulse to jump in with ways to "fix" their essays may have been a result of this concern. Moreover, there were times when she probably became frustrated with students in her group, as she prodded and pushed them to areas they did not want to go.

Relatedly, Harris' identification of the conflict over objectives of tutor and tutee may also explain some of the difficulties I experienced

with the peer group leader. In the impressive exchange between Tyisha, Stan, and Jennifer previously discussed (I reproduce it below), there are also some signs of discontent.

> Stan: try adding something like this; Standard english pulls from cultural independence. Some people feel that without there cultural distinction they will be lost. For a person to truly accelerate in our society they must have a little of both. Cultural diversity is not acceptable in todays world and for a person to not understand or use standard english they will be lost
> Jennifer: Also, she was my spark for this paper. I am responding and giving my idea of her views.
> . . .
> Tyisha: It's good you used Jones however, what is your thesis, is it that last sentence, because if so then you could talk about the things SHE FACED, I think it could be the 2nd and 3rd sentences combined, how do you feel Stan
> Stan: well I write what I think it should be
> Jennifer: thanks Stan, I like that response you gave me previously. I wrote it down because I like it a lot.

The transcript itself shows less of the conflict than did Tyisha's comments to me after class. Tyisha felt that Jennifer was defensive, rejecting Tyisha's input and guidance, though I wonder whether some of this was not a misperception on her part. Nevertheless, I do believe the dialogue highlights two of Harris' points. First, it is possible that Jennifer saw Tyisha as judgmental, since Jennifer clearly felt strongly about her essay. The fact that the peer group leader does not have writing to be mutually critiqued alters the dynamic of peer collaboration and may have led Jennifer to feel defensive about her writing. Secondly, I think it is conceivable that Jennifer wanted what Stan gave her: a more direct answer to her questions about the thesis. Indeed, Stan rewrites the paragraph for her. Tyisha, on the other hand, prods Jennifer into making the discovery for herself, which may have been frustrating for Jennifer. Moreover, Tyisha's use of capital letters when she wrote ""it's good you used Jones however, what is your thesis, is it that last sentence, because if so then you could talk about the things SHE FACED," may have been offensive to Jennifer, although I think Tyisha only meant to emphasize the point she was trying to get across. Jennifer's "thank you" to Stan at the end of the discussion, absent one to Tyisha, may be further evidence of the conflict Tyisha sensed.

The Future of Peer Group Leaders in Basic Writing

This study of the peer group leader in basic writing has significant implications for further research and practice. Above all else, it points to how peer group leaders can aid basic writers' appropriation of academic discourse. The benefits of peer response groups for writers include cognitive, global issues like "better sense of audience" and "motivation to revise," specific task-oriented activities like increased effectiveness in proofreading and editing, and emotional benefits such as offering emotional support and developing a sense of community (Harris, "Collaboration" 372). I have shown how Tyisha contributed to each of these areas in her work with my basic writers.

This study also identifies areas of concern in using peer group leaders, but I do not think the concerns are unsolvable. Rather, I think there are ways to lessen their impact, and I will suggest some of them here. Indeed, I am using peer group leaders again in my current basic writing classes, and I have made many of these changes in my own classes. First, I believe peer group leaders need more training and integration into the basic writing class than the project under study allowed. Tyisha had only one day of training at the beginning of the semester (due to limited funds as well as my inexperience). Moreover, although she and I discussed issues as they arose for her throughout the semester, our conversations were informal and spontaneous. I suggest incorporating more training time, including structured, formal supervision and guidance throughout the semester. I also believe the research on selection and training of peer tutors in Writing Centers can inform this work (see Cobb and Elledge).

Currently, I am using three peer group leaders in my basic writing classes, and I have spent more time with ongoing assessment and adjustment of their work with students as well as with their initial training. It is very difficult for peer group leaders to walk that fine line between offering help and solving the problem for the basic writers with whom they work, an issue tutors in writing centers also face. Indeed, these students' recent roles as peer responders in peer response groups (in English Composition last semester) make the multiplicity of their new roles even more challenging. Thus, their ongoing training centers on these issues.

My current peer group leaders began the semester by reading Richard Straub's "Responding—Really Responding—to Other Students' Writing" and excerpts from Muriel Harris' *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. They participated in a mock peer group session, and they attended class on the date I introduced peer response groups to my basic writing students. Additionally, we continue to discuss and assess their work with students, and two of the three peer

group leaders are co-presenting their experiences as peer group leaders at this year's National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. They will also attend other panels at the conference to learn more about writing center tutorials and the distinctiveness of their roles as peer group leaders.

Furthermore, I suggest that peer group leaders be more integrated into the class than my initial study allowed. Due to limited funding, Tyisha attended class only on peer response days, which lessened the opportunity for students and tutor to bond. Subsequently, the trust that is so important between tutor and student may have been curtailed.[7] At the same time, I believe Tyisha's sense of investment in the class could have been stronger (I am a bit suspect about whether she read all the assignments), although I do think she cared about the students with whom she worked. Attending more classes would have also helped her to feel like part of the class rather than an intruder on peer response days.

Again, I have begun to address some of these problems in my current work with peer group leaders. These students (all were in my English Composition classes last fall, and one was also a former basic writer in the class under study) are attending the basic writing classes an average of two out of three class meetings per week, including the dates when we discuss the readings.[8] Moreover, the peer group leaders attend class and work with students during workshop classes when students are working on prewriting, drafting, and/or revision. I am attempting to find additional ways to expand their role as peer leaders in the class, though again I am somewhat limited by financial constraints.

I also think it would have been helpful for Tyisha to attend class when we discussed the readings in order to obtain a more sophisticated understanding of them. Though more advanced with academic discourse than the basic writers, she still was, after all, a sophomore, and I do not think all her difficulties with the readings were because she did not read them. Relatedly, Tyisha's performance also raises the issue of peer group leaders' age and maturity. I foresee many benefits of using older students as peer group leaders, such as more serious investment in academic work, greater reliability, and higher skill levels in reading difficult texts.[9] However, these benefits might be offset by older students' distance from first-year basic writers and the potential for degradation of peer collaboration.

Additionally, I think it is important to use more peer group leaders in a basic writing classroom. Ideally, each writing group should have a peer group leader. Tyisha's potential to help the students was undermined by the fact that there was only one of her to go around. Subsequently, she had less opportunity to get to really know the students with whom she worked and individualize instruction based on

specific needs. Additionally, I felt somewhat uncomfortable about the fairness of having her work with some students rather than others. In designing the project, I had expected that Tyisha could work with all the students over the course of the semester by working with two or three groups during each peer response class. However, during the first class I learned that she could not go from one group to another because doing so disrupted conversations-in-progress.

Currently, I am using two peer group leaders in one class and one in the other, still less-than-ideal situations.[10] Clearly, funding is a potentially serious obstacle to maximizing the benefits of using peer group leaders in basic writing. As a result, I have begun to think about other ways to support peer group leaders. For example, I am beginning discussions with the Honors Coordinator at my college about finding ways to integrate using peer group leaders with our Honors program. Other possibilities include for-credit internships, community service, and/or senior capstone experiences. Currently, I am involved in designing a major in Writing and Rhetoric for our college, and this major might offer opportunities to integrate the peer group leader experience with students' course of study.

Finally, my study also raises issues related to computer-mediated-communication (CMC) and online peer response sessions. I chose to conduct my peer response sessions online for a number of reasons, but primarily because I have experienced the ways in which "technology can help build a sense of community and change basic writing dynamics" (Varone 213). Because electronic forums challenge teacher-centered pedagogies and provide students with the means to question academic (and other) authority, online peer groups potentially foster basic writers' meaningful participation in the review process. Research on online forums and collaborative writing suggests that students respond well to this less-threatening atmosphere, especially for students who perceive differences in status or knowledge, and engage more collaboratively and intensely with writing (see Schriner and Rice).

In this study, I chose not to focus on CMC issues largely because I was mainly concerned with the use of the peer group leader. I also believe that the implications of peer group leaders hold for both traditional and electronic classrooms, though I expect that there are advantages and disadvantages to each. As I continue to use peer group leaders in my basic writing classes, I will look more closely at the convergences and divergences of electronic and traditional classrooms, including CMC-specific issues such as lag time, space, and anonymity. Indeed, in my current basic writing classes using peer group leaders, I have chosen to conduct peer response sessions face-to-face, even though I hold class in a computer classroom two out of three days per week. Clearly, the specific dynamics of peer group leaders and online peer response is an area ripe for research.

Bishop asserts that teachers who use peer writing groups must be researchers in the sense that they monitor and evaluate the process. They must be "willing to experiment, to redefine group failures as steps in a larger process that leads to success, and to have realistic expectations for this holistic teaching method. Before long, those expectations will be met and hopefully surpassed" (124). I am one of these teachers, eager to continue working with peer group leaders to help basic writers cross the bridge to the academic community. When they cross that bridge and appropriate academic discourse, they will have the opportunity to make their mark on the world.

Notes

1. I thank my collegue Candace Spigelman for the term, "peer group leader."

2. Margaret Weaver rightfully acknowledges the debate over authority and peer response groups in basic writing research. That is, some theorists advocate consensus, that peer response enables students to join our conversations, while others advocate dissent, that peer response groups enable basic writers to resist academic discourse (though she perhaps creates a false dichotomy). Nevertheless, because I believe the use of peer group leaders can facilitate both dissensus and consensus, debating the issue itself is beyond the scope of this essay.

3. I received this grant in conjunction with a colleague, Claudine Keenan. Claudine used a peer group leader in her basic writing class at the Lehigh Valley Campus of Penn State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley College, but I am writing only about my class at the Berks Campus.

4. Throughout this article, I am using pseudonyms for both the peer group leader and the basic writers.

5. I am not encouraging teachers to disappear completely, however. Indeed, I introduced a writing rubric to my students, one that closely resembled my own set of writing assessment criteria with greater emphasis on content and meaning than mechanics, and throughout the semester, we circled back to these issues in numerous ways. However, my attention to rhetorical issues had more to do with my general approach to teaching academic discourse, rather than specifically focused on modeling for peer response groups.

6. I have edited the transcripts to make them legible (students writing online tend to rush and transcripts can be difficult to read), but I have been very careful not to appropriate their words or language.

7. Students will offer more critical and high-quality response in an atmosphere of support and sharing. That is, group members need to gain some sense of group identity, have a sense of shared goals, and feel invested in their peers' work. Robert Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Rick Evans' study of student writing groups stress that for groups that worked well together, "a significant number of students describe their small groups as friendly and family-like in their unconditional acceptance" (34). Similarly, groups fail when students do not feel comfortable with their group members and do not get along.

8. Thus far, the peer group leaders have only listened to, rather than participated in, class discussions of the readings. I am currently weighing the advantages and disadvantages of allowing them to be more involved in this aspect of the class, especially when students work in groups to analyze and interpret the difficult reading selections. Clearly, the peer group leaders' participation in this aspect of the class raises issues both similar to and different from their participation in writing groups.

9. Penn State University, Berks-Lehigh Valley College, was only in its second full year as a four-year college when I undertook this project. Therefore, I had few juniors and seniors from which to choose. I expect a greater pool of potential peer group leaders as our college grows.

10. I received funding for two peer group leaders per class, but unfortunately I received the funding so close to the start of the semester that I was unable to find a fourth student whose schedule met my needs.

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