Learning through Response

Alice M. Gillam

Recently, Kelly, a peer tutor at our writing center, told me that tutoring had made her more tolerant of her own writing: “I’m more willing to be patient with my writing,” she reported. “Even when my draft is a mess, I know that it may have potential or that it may lead to something better.” Tutoring has taught her to see early drafts as “half full” instead of “half empty,” a perspective Peter Elbow calls the “believing game” (1973, 147-90).

My work with peer tutors and writing-group participants has convinced me that peer response benefits the respondent as much as the one to whom the response is directed. Recent research on peer response confirms my conclusion. These studies suggest that with training and practice, peer respondents learn to read, talk, and think about writing with greater maturity and sophistication.

Based on her work with peer-response groups from junior high to upper-division college classes, Karen Spear (1988) argues that reading and responding to peers’ writing “offers the best opportunity for students to develop the higher order reading skills that we so continually complain they lack” (30). Precisely because peer writing is unfinished and flawed, peer readers (or listeners) must draw inferences, make predictions, and construct meaning in a text rather than “receive meaning from it” (29). Consequently, students learn to read their classmates’ writing tentatively, with an open-ended attitude toward the possibilities of the text. This readerly stance invokes a “different order of reading skills” from those normally used when students read professionally written texts which they assume to be flawless, finished, and fixed in meaning (29).

Additionally, peer response requires that students explain their reading process to themselves and others—where they got lost in the text, how and why a certain passage worked, what expectations were aroused but unfulfilled. This need to explain, Spear argues, fosters an awareness of reading as “the making of meaning” (37).

Spear is quick to acknowledge that many students “flounder at first” with this kind of reading task, offering noncommittal responses or responses to the “writer-as-person” rather than to the “text-as-embodiment-of-ideas” (34). However, instead of seeing these problems as an argument against using peer response, Spear sees them as an argument for the reading skills learned through peer response.

A recent study of a peer tutor’s reading strategies lends credence to Spear’s claim that reading peer texts invokes high-level critical reading skills. Ann Matsuihushi and her colleagues (1989) found that Brad, a peer writing tutor, read through the student draft used in the research “recursively, constructing an initial representation of the essay and later returning to particular segments of the text to refine his representation” (305). Asked to “explain the major problems in the draft,” Brad responded first with “comprehension-based” strategies which demonstrated his ability to draw inferences and diagnose problems and later with “production-based” strategies which demonstrated his ability to translate his “understanding of the draft’s strengths and weaknesses” into recommendations for revision (309). This glimpse into Brad’s reading process illustrates the “different order of reading skills” mentioned by Spear.
and exemplifies what reading theorists D. P. Pearson and Robert J. Tierney (1984) call a “thoughtful” reading, one in which the reader reads like “a writer composing a text” (2).

A second benefit of responding to peers’ writing is the development of what Anne Ruggles Gere (1987) calls a “vernacular” for talking about writing (90). Through writing-group and tutorial conversations, students “generate language about language,” creating a “vernacular to be internalized for the members’ future use” (92). In their research on writing-group talk at three grade levels (fifth, eighth, and eleventh/twelfth), Gere and Robert D. Abbott (1985) found that students spent most of their group time talking about the content of one another’s writing and, more important, that their talk was substantive and rich.

According to Gere and Abbott, writing-group respondents develop “critical capacities which will serve them well as writers” (378). Several aspects of writing-group talk foster this development. For one thing, writing-group talk offers students a chance to develop their own vocabulary for talking about writing, a vocabulary that is often more meaningful to them than that used by textbooks and teachers—instead of saying something is a digression, for example, they say “it doesn’t fit” (369). For another, writing-group talk offers an opportunity to engage in “a wider range of language functions” than are normally offered in the classroom, and these opportunities to ask questions, state opinions, give suggestions, and solve problems encourage the development of critical-thinking skills (375). When students offer feedback, they are “not only informing the author,” Gere and Abbott point out, “[they are] also explaining the issue to [themselves]” (378).

In other words, a vernacular for talking about writing provides a language for thinking about writing, a third benefit of peer response for respondents. Cognitive psychologists call this phenomenon “metacognition,” the ability to monitor one’s own thinking processes. Current studies of cognitive development suggest that metacognition is “a major factor in mental ability because people who are aware of how they think perform better than those who are not” (Gere 95). The comments of Bob, a peer tutor cited in Matsuhashi’s study, illustrate the link between talk about writing and metacognition: “By tutoring, I was forced to draw on my own unconscious process. . . . I learned some of the why’s for the way things sound when they work in my head” (294).

For learning through response to occur, of course, teachers must set the stage. Fortunately, writing-group advocates have a number of helpful suggestions from modeling (Healy 1982) to listening and reading activities (Spear) and guidelines for structuring response (Elbow and Belanoff 1989). Yet another available resource is Student Writing Groups: Demonstrating the Process (1988), a videotape which introduces students to writing-group work.

Finally, successful use of peer-response groups requires that we play Elbow’s “believing game,” trusting in students’ capacity to learn from one another and for themselves. The research cited here should encourage our belief, for it suggests that our students have a great deal to learn from giving as well as receiving response.

University of Wisconsin
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201

Works Cited