

# BUILDING TRUST WHILE BUILDING SKILLS IN A PEER WRITING GROUP

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Every semester thousands of college students encounter their first experience with college writing. Most of them have no idea about expectations at this academic level, uses of appropriate college discourse, or ways 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, so that they can read their papers aloud and develop their ideas with the help of others. Much research has shown that peer groups can be an important contribution to writing improvement (Bruffee; Gere; Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans); however, because of many basic writers' lack of experience in group work, insecurity about their writing or discomfort criticizing their peers' essays, writing groups are not always as productive as they might be (Spear; Bishop; Zhu).

As part of a project to encourage more active collaboration in one basic writing class, I was one of five specially selected education majors served as Peer Group Leaders at a branch campus of a large university. As a Peer Group Leader, I had responsibility for three first-year writers. My job was to model positive group behavior and to help my 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, trust among

members must be established if students are to be confident in their ability to communicate effectively.

This small case study of three developmental writers tried to discover how peer group collaboration contributes to writing improvements.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it concentrates on trust and on the role of the Peer Group Leader in building trust among group members. 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 development of trust within the peer group helped the writers to overcome the difficulties.

### **Learning as a Peer Group Leader**

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. To stay in touch with my students' progress as group members and as individual writers, I often wrote myself notes about our workshop sessions and described these exchanges in my weekly journal entries. This record helped me to see whether suggestions made during peer group meetings were used in paper revision and whether revising generated stronger papers. My notes also allowed me to review the sessions to determine continuous 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," early in the semester I asked my group what each of them considered the most difficult part of writing. Their answers gave me a good stepping-stone for understanding how they perceived themselves as writers in relation to how I perceived them based on writing samples.

To be placed in this basic writing class, all incoming students take a placement exam (a 60-questions objective test) that is supposed to test overall facility with language. At the time of this

study, the students who scored below 20 were placed in basic writing. On the first day of class, they completed a writing sample and based on the instructor's assessment, they might be recommended to move to first-year composition. Based on those factors, my students, Mark, Paul, and Bob, stayed in basic writing.

The professor of our seminar group was also the basic writing instructor. In this course, the students were required to write seven essays. 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 for 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.

The members of my group were 18 and 19 years old and varied in writing abilities. Mark,<sup>2</sup> the oldest group member, was the strongest writer in the group. He was a very conscientious and serious student who lacked organization in most of his early essays. He reported doing C work in public high school English and said he rarely read for pleasure. Bob, a traditional first-year student, initially limited his writing ability to a "frame" style, using a five-paragraph writing formula for every essay. Paul was extremely unfocused, and he often under-analyzed 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 in high school. At the start of the semester, both Bob and Paul were clearly working below college level in their writing.

For this study, I read the students' first writing sample as "college writers." Having collected most of the essays written by my group, including first, second, and final drafts. I reviewed the drafts looking for improvements and inconsistencies. As I reviewed their drafts, I noted which feedback came from the group members, the writer, me, or the instructor. I considered the relationship between these observations and my journal entries, which were kept over the entire course. 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. An initial questionnaire gave me some feedback about how they viewed themselves as writers; a final questionnaire revealed how they felt that they had developed and how the writing group had helped. 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, 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. Evans stresses the importance of on and off-task conversation to develop this crucial trust among members. Other theorists who have recognized the value of writing group talk include Byron L. Stay, who builds upon Robert Zoellner's work on the benefits of conversation for composition students. According to Stay, students whose writing has been evaluated as "deficient" may feel "social and psychological pressures" that make them reluctant to re-see and revise what they have written (249). Stay 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"

(248). Also emphasizing the importance of talk for student writers, Michael Kleine's "What Freshmen Say and Might Say to Each Other about Their Own Writing" describes four particular kinds of verbal response that should be promoted in peer workshops. Kleine suggests that group members respond as evaluators to find surface level or formal criticisms, as immediate readers by giving extended suggestions about content and clarity, as helpful listeners to help the writer brainstorm additional ideas, and 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.

To develop conversations to promote trust in my peer group, I borrowed from these theorists. For our first meeting, we got to know each other by talking about ourselves rather than our writing. I followed Robert Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Evans' suggestions about warm-up and friendship-forming activities and strategies that could help the students negotiate their differences. In addition to early "get acquainted" activities, the group comment on all positive aspects each paper before talking about what needed to be changed. This process relaxed the writers, and once the ball was rolling, harsher criticisms by the group were not taken as defensively but were assumed to be a way of making good writing better.

In my first log entry, I wrote, "During my first [workshop] session, I saw a very positive start to the year of composing and revising," and in my second log entry, I noted, "My group works very well together." In the next few revising sessions, as Kleine suggests, I tried to promote the kind of talk that would build confidence and trust by asking each writer to tell us about his essay before he read it to the group.

Initially, the students seemed friendly to me and to each other. All the students had some level of difficulty with organization, so this writing problem did not seem to cause tension among the group. However, tension occurred when members started to notice the level of difference in their writing

abilities. They 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, evidence of hostility in the group.

Mark was a strong writer, although 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, 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 about his future in the Marine Corps, went on about boot camp and returned to his senior year of high school. This made his paper difficult to follow.

Although Mark needed input from the group, but they were intimidated about commenting because they viewed him as a "good writer." He 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 new ideas. The group sometimes helped him with organization or development, but they did so with reluctance and only as a result of my constant encouragement. On the other hand, when he offered them suggestions, they felt he was probably right and that his insight was valuable. Valuing a group member's input was a big step in building trust among the group. It got the students to think about what they had written and how they could add the new ideas in order to better their paper.

In contrast to Mark, Paul had many difficulties and was the weakest writer of the group. When I asked about 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 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Disclosing this personal information was another gradual step in developing peer trust. He felt comfortable sharing a personal characteristic with the group that may not have been evident.

Learning about Paul's ADHD was useful to me as the group leader. I now knew that Paul would need more specific feedback from the group on fewer content areas. I modeled 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.

At the beginning of the semester, Bob told me that he didn't know much about writing "good essays." He had a preconceived notion of how the essays were to sound and couldn't quite get his there. Bob did not want to leave the comfort zone of the five-paragraph formula he had learned in high school. On one of his early essays, the instructor commented that it was "too easy—your essay shows no tension, no human side, no exploration." This was common 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.

In their chapter "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" (50). For my students, the differences had to do with their varied writing abilities. As a result, instead of trusting the group members to help them solve their writing problems, each student felt they 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.

## **Building Trust**

The first issue of trust had to do with my role as the Peer Group Leader. As Karen Spear explains, students will typically play the role of the teacher rather than offer advice as peer readers (54-57). In this group, the students wanted to transfer this authority to me. In order to stay away from this role and give responsibility back to the students, I simply accepted every member's initial suggestions and then pushed them to clarify and develop their ideas and suggestions in the workshop. One strategy that helped to build trust in the group members' suggestions came from Sandra W. Lawrence and Elizabeth Sommers' "From the Park Bench to the (Writing) Workshop Table: Encouraging Collaboration among Inexperienced Writers." After student read his paper aloud, everyone responded to it by writing what was good about the piece, what they liked and disliked, what confused them, or what needed further expansion. Then we discussed everyone's ideas. With lots of feedback, they started to revise more actively. 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."

Although Bob had a negative view of his writing ability, he was open to suggestions, 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. In the following workshop sessions, we helped Bob reword his ideas



and expand on his thoughts so that his essays were much less formulaic. 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. 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 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 few grammatical errors, and 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 knew that with the added help of his group, he could shape his essay to express what he wanted it to say.

Because the other group members were not as strong as Mark, he found it more difficult to trust their suggestions and they were certainly hesitant to offer advice to Mark. I explained to them that it wasn't always necessary to find things to change, but that they could also find things they liked. The peer group could then be used to further blossoming ideas. Within two sessions, they picked up on this point. Everyone could understand each other's ideas of as about "development," not "corrections." In a later interview, Mark said that he had been helped by the peer group: "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 with help from 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 Mark's case, my students learned that they could make beneficial suggestions to Mark.

Helping the group to deal effectively with Paul's writing and helping Paul to trust and consider his peers' suggestions was 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. Paul seemed to be wandering around trying to find something to write; as a result, his peer group members were unable to offer him meaningful feedback. One tactic gradually helped Paul: he identified 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 usually had a focus 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. 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 many 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.

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 could have shown him ways to organize his paper in stages, a strategy we tried to develop toward the end of the semester. Also, Paul was the least likely to use the advice from the workshop, perhaps because he could not remember exactly what he was told or because he didn't know how to integrate the suggestions. It is crucial to take writing disabilities into account as a group tries to help its members.

The biggest factor in developing trust within the group was maturation over the semester. In order to build trust and a greater degree of productivity, the three men had to mature into

their new role, a college role, where 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, the sessions became peer-dominated, rather than teacher-dominated or Peer Group Leader-dominated. 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 was much more helpful for everyone. In addition to corrections from the teacher, group and self input ultimately improved their writing.

### **Peer Group Leaders and the Question of Trust**

Although my group consisted of only three students, all male and all from similar educational backgrounds of central Pennsylvania, this small study of one peer group shows that collaborative peer feedback can help basic writers. Each student gained an understanding of his specific problems as a writer and learned how to develop his skill individually. The students 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 and developed a style that worked for them and their audience.

This study was useful 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. Once the trust was underway 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.

The positive effects of peer group collaboration have been well researched by many scholars. Hopefully, this project will contribute to on-going 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.

#### END NOTES

1 I would like to thank Professor Candace Spigelman for her guidance on this project.

2 The students' names are pseudonyms, and they have given written permission expressing their willingness to participate in the study. The project received approval to conduct research on human subjects from the Penn State University Compliance Office.

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