

## Tutors' Voices

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## ACTIVE REVISION IN A PEER GROUP

### *The Role of the Peer Group Leader*

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Typically, college composition students receive responses to their writing in the form of margin and end comments written by their professors. These comments are filled with suggestions, praise, criticism, and reactions. It is then the students' responsibility to take these comments and incorporate them into their papers. Because understanding response and revision is often difficult for basic writers, it is common practice for their teachers to organize them into peer writing groups (Bruffee 1998; Spear 1988; Willis 1993; Brooke, Mirtz, and Evans 1994a). However, if students are going to make the best use of their writing groups, peer readers will need to know how to offer useful responses, and writers will need to know how to use their group's suggestions to revise their papers.

As part of a research project on peer writing groups, I was chosen to be an undergraduate peer group leader in a basic writing class at Penn State Berks. My purpose was to act as a facilitator in a group of three students, Zach, Ryan, and Kristin,<sup>1</sup> and to model how a peer writing group should work. My goal was to help students improve their writing abilities and to become comfortable with the writing process as they offered and accepted suggestions for revising their essays.

In the early weeks of the semester, I thought that I was effectively guiding my group to make substantive changes when they revised. A week after what seemed to be a most successful peer group session, I discovered to my great disappointment that my group members were making no real conceptual changes to their papers. On examining drafts they'd handed in to their professor, I saw that there were a few grammatical corrections, some rewording, but that they had not touched the major problems that we had discussed in the peer group the week before. In fact, the professor's comments and suggestions were the same ones that they had given to each other at our meeting. This made me realize that, as the

peer group leader, I needed to reinforce revision in my group, to give my developmental writers an understanding of what revision actually meant. Without such reinforcement, the students could not revise because they did not know how.

Experienced writers know that revision involves reshaping the paper to make sense of it. It is a time-consuming process that requires the writer to redesign the work, making it fuller, more interesting, and more expressive (Murray 1978; Willis 1993). Even when we tell college students that they need to revise, at the basic writing level they will quite often skip this process. Either they don't know how to revise effectively or they cannot imagine the degree of change required for "real" revision.

In her seminal article, Nancy Sommers (1980) found that an experienced writer will throw out an entire draft without even thinking about it, but when I asked my group if they had ever thrown away a draft and started over from scratch, all three told me "No!" and looked quite horrified at the thought. Zach told me, "If I write it down, I am going to keep it there. I will just make it sound better." This mindset was part of the difficulty I confronted in trying to teach my peer group how to successfully revise their essays through writing group conversations. In this chapter, I will describe the strategies I implemented as a peer group leader to encourage revision by training group members to respond more productively and by teaching my student writers to position themselves to use their peers' suggestions.

### **HELPING BASIC WRITERS TO RESPOND IN PEER GROUPS**

If my writing group members were going to be good readers and responders, they needed to know how to give the right kinds of response, and they also needed to know what kinds of issues to address at our meetings. Initially, the peer group could not distinguish between surface-level changes and deep revisions. Like the students in Sommers's case study (1980), my group members thought of the revision process as similar to the editing process. As Sommers also observed, when my students defined the revision process, their common definition involved scratching out words and rewriting them to make them sound better. When I asked members about the difference between revising and editing, they seemed perplexed by the question itself. There was a moment of silence after I asked the question while they tried to find an answer. Zach guessed that editing and revising were the same thing, which meant to "fix the paper up" and make grammatical changes. In fact, during my first peer group

meeting, Zach told us that he was a C student in writing in high school because “I didn’t know my grammar rules.” Like the other members, he seemed convinced that if he better understood grammatical principles, his writing would improve.

This fixation on having a grammatically perfect paper took much attention away from our peer group’s tackling the more important issues in a paper. For example, Kristin came to one peer group meeting saying that she had already started to revise her paper. She stated that she had only one paragraph that she was unsure of. As she began to read the paper, I found problems with organization, confused duplication of ideas, and quotes that did not relate to her argument. I could tell by Ryan’s and Zach’s expressions that they were also confused. After Kristin finished reading her draft, Zach looked at her and said, “Um, I don’t get it.” However, when I asked Zach what he didn’t understand, he couldn’t tell me. Rather, he suggested changing a single word. Similarly, when I asked Ryan what he thought, he told me the essay was confusing, and then he began to point out grammatical errors. Like her peers, Kristin’s attempt at revising showed that she did not understand what the revision process entailed. At the end of our session, I asked Kristin if I could see where she had started to make her corrections. I discovered that all of her corrections and revisions were at the surface level. She hadn’t even attempted to address global issues.

Why is it that students focus on grammatical issues versus substantive issues? Karen Spear says that in first-year composition writing groups, students often lack the confidence to focus on broader issues. In a peer group setting, the students want to be helpful contributors, so they will focus on those problems where they are confident they can offer a correct or helpful solution (1988, 41). Zach and Ryan both saw something wrong with Kristin’s paper, but they didn’t know exactly what it was or how to approach it. Instead of attempting to tackle the bigger problems, it was easier for them to point out where a comma was missing because they knew that they would be right.

Helping my group to distinguish between surface-level errors and the substantive needs of the paper and to respond primarily to the substantive issues was my first challenge. I knew that in order to get students to focus on global issues, they needed to understand more about the revision process (Murray 1978; Spear 1988; Sommers 1980; Willis 1993). Therefore, during our sessions I repeatedly told my group that we needed to focus on the ideas and organization of the paper, and I stressed that taking care

of their commas should be the last thing that they do. When one of the peer group members pointed out a grammatical error, I told them that they were right, but I quickly asked that student a question dealing with the main ideas in the paper. Since according to Mina Shaughnessy, in order for basic writers to conquer their problems, they need to develop self-esteem, (1977, 127), I never flat out told my group members that they were wrong to say where a comma should be placed. I always let them know that they were correct and then encouraged tackling a bigger issue.

According to Robert Brooke, response is “the third essential element of a writer’s life,” directly following after “time” and “ownership” (1994, 23). Brooke, Ruth Mirtz, and Rick Evans say that “response helps writers develop the feelings of social approval necessary to continue writing, an understanding of audience reactions and their own writing processes, and the ability to revise particular pieces effectively” (23). Feedback gives writers a sense of social approval and the feeling that their writing has value. This feeling of social approval boosts their self-esteem and confidence in their writing, which in turn will improve their writing skills because they will be more willing to try. A peer group’s response to writing is or should be a kind of conversation, which Bruffee views as the key to writing improvement. The writer must be able to express him- or herself orally before his or her thoughts are written down (1998, 130–31). Therefore, the peer group should be responding to the writer in a form that will engage the writer in a conversation, similar to the way that the writer should be writing.

In the peer group, it is important that the conversation between members is concrete and directed toward the problems in the paper. Often I found that my group could not provide this kind of feedback to their peers, as is illustrated in the transcript of one of our early sessions. Ryan had started out his paper by explaining that animals react instantly on instinct. By the end of the paper, however, he’d changed his focus to argue that humans have boundaries in life that animals do not have, thus inhibiting potentially instinctive reactions. After Ryan had read his paper, I gave the group a few minutes to collect their thoughts. Then Ryan asked the group, “Does this paper make sense?” Here are the responses that followed:

- Zach:* Yeah, you gotta keep going. Finish it up.  
*Kristin:* Yeah, keep going.  
*Ryan:* How do I elaborate more?

[Group is silent.]

*Kelly:* What is your main point? What are you trying to say in the paper?

*Ryan* [somewhat unsure]: Animals react on instinct. About the introduction and—

*Zach and Kristin* [cutting in]: It's good.

*Zach:* Make it into a question.

*Ryan:* How should I start that?

*Zach:* You need a transition between these two paragraphs.

Kristin and Zach knew that Ryan's focus was not consistent in his paper, but they didn't know how to explain what was wrong or how to give suggestions to clarify it. Instead, Zach suggested introducing the argument in the form of a question, but that really didn't solve Ryan's problem of clarity. He then jumped to telling Ryan that he needed a transitional paragraph before the second paragraph. It was a suggestion that might have been helpful if Ryan had been ready for it, or if Zach had been able to explain why it was needed.

At that point, I interrupted and tried to work on getting Ryan to establish one main point. I didn't like having to cut in, but clearly the peer group was not giving Ryan what he needed to know. I wanted Ryan to explain what he wanted to say in his paper first, so we could talk about how he was going to express his main idea and stay focused on that one idea. In order to guide the group to give concrete suggestions, I urged them with questions, a strategy I adopted from Meredith Sue Willis. In *Deep Revision* (1993), Willis suggests asking writers questions like "Could you tell me more here?" in order to get the writer to figure out the essay's central point by expressing it orally.

While Willis offers this suggestion as a strategy for working with writers individually or in peer groups, I redirected the strategy to peer readers by asking Zach and Kristin what they thought Ryan's main point was. They both told me that Ryan was arguing that animals react on instinct, while humans act by choice. When I asked for suggestions about how Ryan could make his focus clearer, Zach told Ryan that he needed more examples of instinctive animal behavior. Although I agreed with Zach's suggestion, I knew that more elaboration was needed, so I engaged Ryan in a conversation about his assertions by simply asking him to explain his thoughts in different words. He told the group about an experience that he'd had with a deer, an incident he had mentioned in his essay. In talking

out his thoughts, he offered much more detail about the differences in the reactions of deer and humans. I turned back to the group and asked them to explain the significance of Ryan's story. This led to a discussion of the boundaries humans construct that deflect their natural instinctive responses. The group gave Ryan several suggestions about developing his paper to create a more meaningful and consistent argument. My strategy of directing specific questions drove the peer group to offer concrete suggestions for Ryan to use.

Another strategy that I used to encourage group communication was breaking down the paper paragraph by paragraph, as suggested in "Revision: Nine Ways to Achieve a Disinterested Perspective" (1978). According to George J. Thompson, by focusing on each paragraph separately and stating the purpose for each paragraph, student writers can begin to discover their essays' intentions and meanings. Again, I redirected Thompson's strategy to the group by asking group members to explain the significance of each paragraph in their peers' essays. During a session in which Zach was having trouble determining what he wanted to say in his paper, I had the group look at each paragraph and find its importance. Zach had written about the relationship between language and culture. His main point was that a person's language reflected his or her culture and determined how the speaker or writer was perceived by society. To argue his point, he used examples from the movie *Rush Hour*, but his paper seemed more like a movie review than an academic argument.

During the session, I asked Ryan to look at Zach's second paragraph and come up with a reason why Zach would have placed it in his paper. Ryan told me that the paragraph portrayed how the two main characters (one Chinese and the other African American) perceived each other based on their culture and how they talked. I then asked Zach if that was the purpose of the paragraph and if he could explain its importance. Zach agreed with Ryan's explanation and was able to express the importance to me in his own words. We continued to work our way through his essay, breaking down each paragraph as we had done with the second paragraph. For each section, Zach wrote down what his peers said. As he was writing, I could tell he was getting a better grasp of the paper and knew how to express his point from his examples. He then explained to me that what he really wanted to say in his paper was that people judge each other based on their race and language, and he explained how his examples proved this point. What he said made complete sense.

### APPLYING PEER GROUP FEEDBACK TO THE PAPER

Although a class may be set up to help students with the revision process, there is no guarantee that students will actively revise their paper once they leave the classroom. In private, Zach confided, “When I try to revise, I just stare at my computer screen not knowing what to do with the suggestions that were made.” This was a major problem with my group. They knew that changes needed to be made with their papers, they had heard the suggestions, but as the following scenario illustrates, when it came to making those changes after the group meeting, they didn’t know what to do with them.

During one peer group meeting, we spent a lot of the time discussing Ryan’s ending paragraph for his essay on the ways media influence society. In his conclusion, Ryan had written,

Are we the people influenced by the media? I am influenced by the commercials for apparel. Whenever I see a commercial for a new pair of shoes or a commercial for a new style of clothing, I feel like I have to have it, even if I don’t need it. Many people are influence by this form of media. Media is shown in many different ways. There are commercials for advances in technology or new apparel arriving in stores. Other types of media are the news and movies. Some people can be influenced by movies. I went to the movie *Gone in 60 Seconds* with a friend. It is a movie full of suspense with a group of artists who steal rare or extremely expensive cars. After the movie was over he said to me, “I feel like stealing a Mercedes.” I said, “What?” I couldn’t believe the movie had that affect [*sic*] on him. I just thought that it was an excellent movie with lots of suspense. That’s all! But again we are all different people. We are all affected by things differently.

It was obvious there were several ideas operating in this one-paragraph conclusion, ranging from an example of how Ryan had been swayed by advertising to a listing of influential forms of media to discussion of how his friend had responded to a violent film. Since everyone, including Ryan himself, was confused about the essay’s argument, we spent a great deal of time talking about how media influences our beliefs and opinions. Everyone was offering examples: Kristin told Ryan that she, along with many other women, wanted to change her hairstyle after watching the television show *Friends* and seeing Jennifer Aniston’s hairstyle; Zach talked about how television commercials had convinced him to buy a certain pair of sneakers. As Ryan began to tell the group what influenced him when he watched television, I could tell he was starting to understand what he wanted to say. We continued to provide

concrete feedback and examples so that at the end of our session, Ryan was able to state his argument out loud to all of us. He had been taking notes during the revision session and honestly seemed ready and prepared to revise.

A week later, when I saw Ryan's paper after he had handed it into the professor, I discovered that Ryan hadn't used any of the suggestions developed during the peer group meeting. Although I was terribly disappointed at the time, in retrospect, I realize that Ryan came into the session confused. In the fifteen minutes, we threw a lot of information and suggestions at him. He listened to everything we said, but he was not ready to deal with all of that feedback, nor was he capable of taking the examples and suggestions and writing them down in his own words. Ryan felt overwhelmed after the peer group session. Now I realize how much need there is to reinforce revision strategies during the session. This reinforcement is necessary not because students are lazy or don't have time to revise, but because they are truly not able to accomplish successful revisions on their own.

In the first place, if writers like Ryan don't really know how they feel about their argument or aren't really sure about what they are trying to say, they won't be able to use their peers' suggestions because they will be trying to work on their own meanings. In order to help writers to tackle their revisions using suggestions made during the peer group meeting, I had to first help them to clarify the central point of their draft. To do this, I borrowed a teaching strategy from Karen Pepper at the University of Maine (2001). In Pepper's classes, students hand in their essays at the beginning of a class. After she teaches the lesson for the day, she asks her students to spend a few minutes writing about the essays they have just submitted. This exercise helps students to reinforce their main focus or central argument because they have spent time away from thinking about their papers. When they are asked to write down their main point, their statements come straight from their immediate reactions without any deep thinking. Following my confrontation with Ryan's (non)revision, I adapted this idea into my peer writing group. After we finished commenting on everyone's papers, I asked each writer to tell me the main idea in his or her essay and to offer examples of how he or she was going to back up the main idea. I did not let them look down at their drafts when they talked to me, and this restriction forced writers to restate their point without rereading it. It also showed me whether the student understood what was being suggested to him or her during the group meeting. If they couldn't state what the paper was about, then obviously they didn't know



what the focus of the paper was, nor did they comprehend what had been discussed in the group.

Over time, I also realized that the group actually made real revisions on their papers. In one of the later classes, their professor had assigned the class to write a short reflective essay explaining the revisions that they made on their papers following a peer group meeting. When my group met a week later to discuss the same paper, I saw that my students had attempted to address conceptual issues, not just their grammatical errors. Without having to write the reflective statement, those changes most likely would have not been made. Therefore, I introduced end-of-writing-group reflections by asking the students to turn over their papers and to write out what they learned from the group that day and what changes they were going to make on their papers. I found this strategy useful because it helped writers to formulate their strategies for making changes while we were still together in the peer group. Also, I could then tell who wasn't going to be able to tackle his or her revisions. If the student couldn't write out what he or she needed to do, then I knew that I needed to spend more time with that student figuring out the essay's meaning so that he or she would be ready to revise.

Throughout the semester I noticed that students would readily make the changes suggested by the professor but not by their peer groups. Ironically, often the peer group had given the same suggestion as the professor. Clearly, the writer would have saved time if he or she had listened to the peer group in the first place. When I asked Zach if he listened to suggestions that the peer group gave him, he told me, "Yes." But when I asked if he generally used the suggestions to make changes, he said, "No." In contrast, when I asked if he always made changes from the professor's comments, he answered, "Yes," but he could not explain why this was the case. Gerry Sultan's research in peer writing groups found peer group members' willingness to revise in response to teacher comments and their reluctance to revise on the basis of their peers' comments resulted from a desire for artistic freedom. One student interviewee explained: "When a teacher tells you, you need to change something, you have to, whether you want to or not; but when one of your friends says it, you say, 'I don't want to'" (1998, 67). In "Beyond the Red Pen: Clarifying Our Role in the Response Process" (2000), Bryan Bardine, Molly Schmitz Bardine, and Elizabeth Deegan recognize that students are willing to revise from teacher response because they know that their actions will ultimately give them a better grade. In contrast, students cannot be sure that their peer group's feedback is accurate.

These studies, as well as my own experiences with my group, suggest that teachers and peer group leaders need to collaborate to find ways to work with students to revise by reinforcing the work that a peer group puts into a paper. Teachers can show developing writers that if they use the suggestions given by the peer group, it will improve their grade and save some of their time. For example, the reflective statement that the students wrote for the professor was beneficial to their understanding of revision. Although it helped greatly, requiring students to write reflective statements for every revision that they made following their peer group meetings would become tedious. Students would find revision even more of a burden because of the extra workload. However, I do feel that students need some kind of required reinforcement to revise from peer feedback. Peer group leaders need to collaborate with the course instructor to insist on “proof” that revisions were made. Students could write a short paragraph of explanation or attach a copy of their rough drafts with their revisions written in and with a brief explanation as to how or why they made them. In any case, peer group leaders and teachers must reinforce the use of peer group suggestions and hold student writers responsible for using this feedback as they revise. Without the strong demand for peer-generated changes, students will not attempt deep revisions because they will think that it is not that important to do so.

#### **WHAT A PEER GROUP LEADER SHOULD EXPECT**

When I discovered that members of my peer group were not revising their papers, I was upset. I felt like all of the work and time spent in the group meetings was for nothing. Then I came across something that Ryan had written on his end-of-semester reflective essay about his writing and the peer group. Ryan had talked about how the peer group was a big help to him and how his writing had improved because of it. Most significantly, he had written about an incident in which the peer group helped him add detail and explain ideas in his essay dealing with the influence of language on culture. He wrote, “My peer group helped me to find my lack of detail and elaborate on [my friend] Larry and what he had to do with my essay.” After reading this statement, I checked my journal entry, where I’d noted that the group had spent time helping Ryan elaborate on the relationship between his central argument and Larry’s role in his paper. But when I checked the essay Ryan had turned in to the professor, it showed no changes from the draft we had talked about during our session. Ryan had not revised the paper according to his group’s suggestions; in fact, no changes on clarifying Larry had been made.

However, instead of being discouraged, I was impressed that Ryan even wrote about the incident. It showed me that he did learn something, that he knew that the changes to the Larry segment were necessary and he even thought he'd made them; therefore, the peer group was accomplishing something important. Similarly, in an interview with Zach in the middle of the semester, he told me that the peer group was a big help because the group showed him what needed to be changed that he didn't see himself. Realizing what needs to be changed is the first step in revising. Although this may seem like a small step, it really isn't. Like anything that one learns to do, it takes time and practice. The peer group forced the student writers to see their writing from a different perspective. They were learning about revision because they were hearing suggestions to improve their papers by other readers and they were thinking about how other writers might change their own papers. The recognition of what revision is and the realization of what needed to be changed in their papers were huge steps toward improving and developing their writing abilities.

As Shaughnessy (1977) reminded composition teachers long ago, a basic writer is a student who is a beginner in writing. I now understand that the members of my peer group came into the class with little knowledge of college-level writing. Therefore, it was unrealistic to think they would leave the peer group and rewrite their papers to realize their full potential. They did not have enough experience to do so. But working in a peer group is a significant step forward in aiding basic writers to understand the complexities of writing as a process. The peer group taught the peer group members how the writing process worked and what is involved in revision.

A peer group leader cannot expect perfection from the group and should not feel discouraged if drastic improvements are not made. The peer group leader is essential in the peer group to guide basic writers. As Donald Murray says, "It is the job of the writing teacher to find what is on the page, which may be hidden from the student" (1978, 58). The peer group leader takes on a similar role in the group by guiding the whole group into seeing the meaning of the paper and assisting the student to make the paper say what the student means. Getting students to revise their papers in peer groups is often a perplexing problem. With a peer group leader reinforcing and facilitating the revision process, revision is made easier for the group members. This leads to a better understanding of the writing process and greater improvements in developing students' writing.