



A student author reads his writing aloud while other members of the group follow along with copies of his writing.

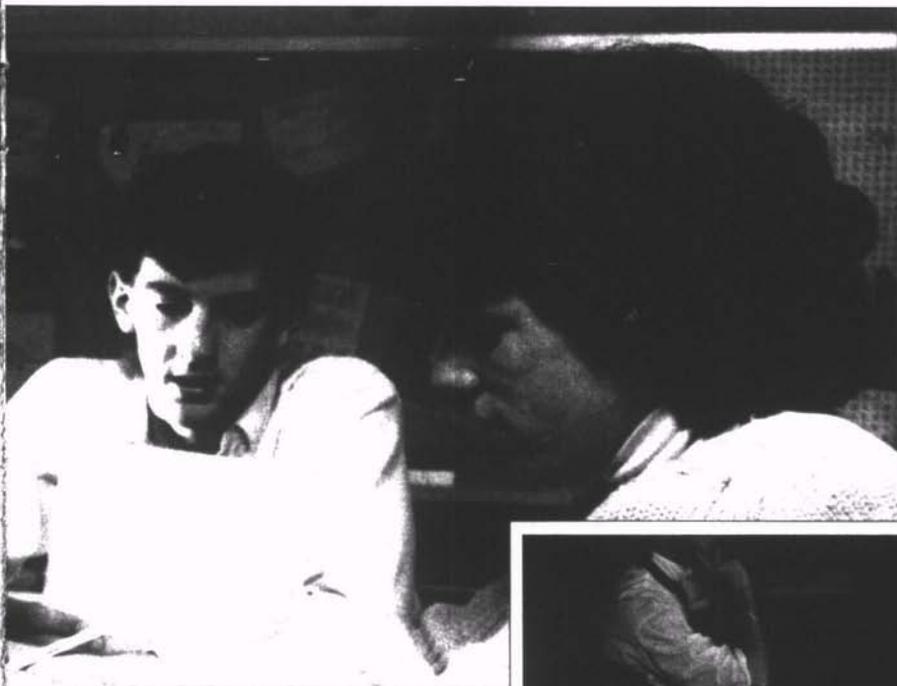
Improving Writing in the Disciplines

In Writing Response Groups students share their writing with peers who have been instructed in how to provide positive feedback, raise questions, and suggest improvements.

Writing and the teaching of writing have enjoyed much attention from researchers in recent years. Seminal studies, such as those conducted by Emig, Perl, Sommers, Flower and Hayes, Graves, and Calkins, have provided important insights about writing. As a result, writing is now viewed primarily as a recursive process, involving *prewriting* (topic selection, audience and purpose consideration, data gathering, and organization), and *drafting* and *revision* (looking again at the draft and making appropriate changes in ideas followed by editing for the surface features of grammar, spelling, and punctuation).

The translation of these findings into classroom practice is in full swing in this country. Inservice courses in how to use the writing process approach abound; teachers in disciplines other than English/language arts are being encouraged to use it; curriculum guides are being adapted to emphasize it; and texts are being rewritten from its perspective.

One of the most frequently suggested strategies for helping students improve their writing and their use of the writing process is the Writing Response Group: a form of cooperative learning in which small groups of student writers provide feedback on the strengths and limitations of each



Photographs by Kenneth Braxton

other's writing during the revision stage of the writing process.

Plan Group Membership

In effective Writing Response Groups teachers divide classes heterogeneously (Staton 1983, Johnson et al. 1984), with two to five students in each group. This arrangement appears to maximize tutorial and higher-order thinking opportunities for students. (Initial and short-term experiences with the process seem to work best with two or three members to each group.)

Begin with a "Fishbowl"

Before students implement the

Members of the response group write their PQP comments

“Left to their own devices, students focus primarily, and often solely, on grammatical and spelling errors, ignoring content.”

response group process, it is essential that they understand the correct procedure. A “fishbowl” demonstration in which the teacher and three or four prompted students role-play a session and discuss the procedure is an excellent way for students to begin.

Develop Focus Questions

Next, teachers should give the students a focus for examining what they have written. (Left to their own devices, students focus primarily, and often solely, on grammatical and spelling errors, ignoring content.) Students cannot examine a piece of writing to

make it perfect or find *all* the strengths and weaknesses; in order to gain more than vague or superficial feedback, they need to focus on a limited number of aspects of the written piece. The teacher formulates focusing questions so that the group’s discussion extends the instruction that took place prior to drafting the writing. For example, suppose a group of elementary students are bringing to the Writing Response Group drafts of fables they have written. Before students wrote their drafts, their teacher should have taught them about the basic characteristics of a fable: characters are usually animate or inanimate



A writer listens as members of his group give PQP responses

objects in nature; they have human-like personalities; their personalities affect what happens in the story; and the moral of the fable is directly related to the plot. Focusing questions could then be:

- Are the main characters animals or inanimate things in nature?
- Are the personalities of the characters appropriate for what happens in the story?
- Does the moral grow out of the story?

For a secondary social studies class, given the assignment to write a letter to their congressperson explaining why the legislative process should be

streamlined, the prewriting instruction and response group focus might be:

- Did the letter give at least three convincing reasons for the necessity of streamlining the legislative process?
- Are the reasons logically sequenced?

In a college teaching methods class, given the assignment to plan an inductively developed lesson, the prewriting instruction and focus might include:

- What are the "specifics"? The "generalizations"? Are the "specifics" sufficient for students to make this generalization? Are the specifics appropriate for the intended students?

This group process can also be used for editing written material—to check grammar, punctuation, and spelling—but editing should come only after a piece has been revised for content. Readers cannot focus on ideas and correctness concurrently (King 1985), and work should be edited only after the ideas are satisfactory to the writer.

Teach the Praise-Question-Polish (PQP) Technique

Students need to be trained in response group techniques. Each student member takes a turn at being the focused writer to which the other group members respond. The writer reads his or her work aloud, while the responders listen. Ideally, the responders follow along using copies of the writer's material. This oral reading allows the reader to hear the material in a different "voice" and to recognize where changes would be appropriate. It also gives the responders an opportunity to hear the entire work.

The author then examines the writing silently, while the responders make notations in answer to the focus questions, using the PQP form—praise, question, polish (ASCD 1981).

Praise. What is good about the writing? What should not be changed? ("I liked your use of two hens in your fable. You needed characters that were not very smart.")

Question. What do you not understand? ("Why did the hens go to the country first?")

Polish. Suggest specific improvements without actually making the changes for the author. ("I think you need to say the hens went into the building; otherwise the moral doesn't make sense.")

These PQP notes can be written directly on the responder's copy of the writing, although many teachers prefer to have them on a separate sheet of paper under the heading PQP to ensure attention to each type of feedback.

Responders then share their PQP comments orally with the writer. Writers are encouraged to be open-minded and to recognize that they have the

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option of accepting or rejecting the suggestions. Responders are taught to give praise first, followed by question and polish. In this way positive reinforcement prepares students for constructive criticism. (Response groups that do not use PQP seem to give polish suggestions and neglect the praise element.) At the conclusion of the session, the writer receives these notes for use during revision time.

This PQP method feeds the cooperative learning atmosphere of the Writing Response Group, combining positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. It tells the writer what is good, what should be kept, and what is unclear to the reader while also providing specific suggestions for improving the piece without appropriating the writing.

There are benefits both for writers, who gain feedback, and for responders, who sharpen their analytical/critical skills. Comments about the Writing Response Group testify to its effectiveness.

- "I wish we would do more PQP. I like hearing what others have to say about my story. (Of course, I don't always change everything they say.) And I get ideas about how to write in different ways when I hear my friends' stories" (Brooke, grade 3).

- "I worked and worked on that paragraph and felt pretty good about it. I feel even better now that my group told me what they liked and helped me come up with a better ending" (Debbie, grade 8).

- "Writing Response Groups are very helpful because... 'fresh eyes' are better than 'old eyes'... the writer has seen the piece too much and doesn't see problems" (Keith, grade 12).

- "The most helpful part of the group was that they supplied me with the boost I needed by showing me that they thought my ideas were very good. They gave me the confidence that I needed because I was not sure whether I had completed the task to the full extent needed" (David, college junior).

- "I have seen a great improvement in the quality of writing since we have begun using PQP in response groups. I feel that there are two reasons for this: one, students are initially more

motivated to write well when they anticipate peer response; two, students are helping one another analyze their content, organization, and expression, and as a result major revisions are made before the final draft is completed" (high school special education teacher). □

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