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# More Than Meets the Eye: A Look at Sharing Writing and Peer Response in an ESL Context

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**More Than Meets the Eye: A Look at Sharing Writing and Peer  
Response in an ESL Context**

by Catherine Bachy

submitted to Dr. David Kinsey, Center for International Education, in partial  
completion of a Master's Degree in Education at the University of Massachusetts'  
School of Education, Amherst.

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WRITTEN PERMISSION FROM THE AUTHOR**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this paper to all of my students from whom I have learned invaluable lessons about teaching and about life and who inspire me to offer the best of myself.

## Acknowledgements

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# More Than Meets the Eye: A Look at Sharing Writing and Peer Response

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## Introduction

"I feel like I'm traveling like a ball of sage brush across the plains, picking up bits and pieces of the land, twigs, leaves, pieces of rubbish as I roll all over my topic getting bigger and bigger rather than more focused. But I sure am more interesting looking than a straight log."

--Personal Journal, 10/21/92

I come to this topic: sharing writing and peer response in ESL writing, influenced by a variety of settings and experiences. From my first experience teaching ESL as a high school teacher in Morocco, I learned from my students the value of collaboration and collective work in contrast to the socialized experience and value of individual and independent work that I transported to this setting. More recently my work with ESL learners from refugee and immigrant backgrounds as well as my own experience with writing engendered in me a belief in the primacy of one's own experience as a worthy source of knowledge.

In the fall of 1991 I started teaching freshman composition in the University of Massachusetts' Writing Program. Here I was trained to teach using a writing process approach. This consisted of motivating students to write essays through several drafts and to design peer revising activities where students would get feedback from each other on their drafts as part of a recursive process of writing and revision. Most of the students in the classes that I have taught are native English speakers, Anglo-Americans. However a few members of my class are non-native English speakers, who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and who speak English as a second or perhaps third language.

In the second semester of my teaching I became more interested in how non-native English speakers coming from different ethnic and language backgrounds experience the writing process approach. So I conducted a case study of an ESL writing classroom that practiced writing using a writing process approach. The case study was a qualitative study consisting of 10 hours of observation of classroom activities, collecting data through ethnographic and qualitative methods, and conducting and transcribing three interviews. From this study emerged a rich source of information and "thick" description. (Merriam, 1991) Interesting issues emerged as I spent time observing and studying a class of non-native English speakers engaged in the writing process.

During the following summer I took a full time ESL intensive teaching job where I taught writing to adult ESL learners from various backgrounds. My background and experience in teaching through the writing process approach and my belief in the value of this approach in practicing my own writing, influenced my instruction of writing in this setting. I encouraged students to write multiple drafts and facilitated peer sharing and feedback on content as well as grammar and structure of their writing. Again I was faced with questions about how to apply writing process techniques in an ESL classroom. A number of issues emerged as I practiced these techniques with these students and I wanted to explore these further.

At the center of teaching writing through the writing process approach is the technique of sharing writing and peer response. I have chosen to focus on these methods in this paper. I will begin with a theoretical introduction to principles of the writing process and sharing writing and peer response. Then I will review the findings from my case study and identify the issues that I saw emerge when sharing writing and doing peer response in the ESL classroom that I observed. This identification of issues will lead me into a discussion of these and other issues that have come to my attention as I have reviewed the literature on this subject. This section concludes with a miscellany of practical suggestions for writing teachers and/or workshop facilitators that reflect the technical, cultural, and philosophical points raised in this paper.

In the final sections of this paper I will discuss the impact of cultural values and communicative norms on the teaching of writing in an ESL context. These are what I think of as the subtler issues, that don't jump to our attention, at first, but that reveal themselves as key stone issues that need to be examined if we are to make sharing writing and peer response appropriate and respectful techniques in the teaching of writing in a multicultural context.

This master's project represents a joining of many interests and areas of study. It reflects my beginnings in ESL teaching and adult literacy. It is strengthened by my on-going experience and reflection as a teacher of writing to native and non-native English speakers, skilled and "basic" writers. It is informed by my perspective not only as a teacher but also as a writer who values and practices a writing process approach including sharing writing and peer response.

## **The writing process approach: A theoretical introduction**

In this paper I will make many references to the writing process approach and to peer response. So I'd like to spend some time discussing some theoretical foundations and principles of the writing process approach.

The writing process approach emerged out of a paradigm shift in the teaching of writing influenced by the early 1980's work of linguists, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, and composition theories. Maxine Hairston's work in 1982 is often cited (Bell, 1991; Berger, 1990; Spear, 1988) as a transitional piece that raises questions about the value of the traditional product centered model in writing. A new paradigm of writing focusing on process emerged. (Di Pardo & Freedman, 1988; Zamel, 1983) This focus on process rather than product emphasizes the recursive nature of writing, one that involves, prewriting, drafting, evaluation and revising. (Berger, 1990)

The process writing approach as I instruct it, is characterized by students writing several drafts of a piece of writing, and receiving responses and feedback from their peers regarding a piece of writing that they are working on. The idea behind this feedback is that the student will then revise her draft taking into consideration the feedback that she received. This process approach also emphasizes freewriting: writing without stopping, not looking back and editing, but just jabbering away on paper to get ideas out in raw form, as a way to begin writing a piece. Peter Elbow describes the process writing approach metaphorically as cooking or growing. Growing because a piece of writing doesn't just happen after one sitting, but goes through various stages in its evolution, hence the drafts and the revising. And cooking because as a smaller process the writer is percolating, simmering, brewing over the ideas that go into a piece of writing. This percolating is enhanced by other readers responses and feedback. (Elbow, 1973)

An important theoretical assumption inherent in the writing process approach is that of the social nature of writing. When describing the traditional product centered approach versus the process approach I visualize two different pictures of writers. In the first picture is a romantic image of the writer alone in a small, dimly lit office with only the light of her computer screen keeping her



company. A trash bin next to her overflows with drafts and starts that she judges unworthy for her audience. She composes alone, reviewing her words and throwing them away when they don't work. Finally when she is done she emerges with her finished product ready to launch into the world. Another image of a writer is one where the writer may create alone in her room or with a group of other writers but she recognizes and makes explicit her connections to the social world. She recognizes that her creation does not take place in a vacuum, separate from her conversations with humanity. She writes and asks her peers to review her work as she revises and engages in the recursive act of writing.<sup>1</sup>

The writing process approach makes explicit the idea that creation in composing does not occur in isolation. Creation is a social act that is influenced by the conversation of humanity. Whether consciously or unconsciously, writers are influenced by their social interactions. According to Kenneth Bruffee (1984) our learning to write and to compose mirrors our social interaction and conversations. He says that first we learn to talk, to take part in conversation and that eventually conversation and dialogue become internalized in our heads and we enact these conversations when we write. From this conversation we learn to compose. The developmental theorist, Lev Vygotsky calls this " 'inner speech', the stream of language that runs through our minds, reflecting external language heard in conversation." (Spear, p. 4)

The act of writing is seen as a collaboration with others, a social relationship. In fact much writing that is done in the world outside of school is not done by individuals acting alone but rather by teams of individuals. Government documents, proposals for project funding, corporate publications, educational and business reports are often done collaboratively through a recursive writing process that involves drafting, revising, discussing, and feedback and more drafting and revising.

A valuable part of the writing process, that is collaborative and part of a bigger social conversation, is the act of sharing writing and receiving feedback on the writing. Sharing writing and peer response

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<sup>1</sup> For an in depth discussion on the theoretical and philosophical differences between creation as an individual act and creation as a social act see: LeFevre, Karen. (1987) *Invention as a Social Act*. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.

make explicit the nature of writing as part of a social act. These activities underscore the important role social exchange can play in the writing process. Through the writing process approach we see writing as a process which is "enhanced by working in, and with, a group of other writers." (Janet Emig cited in DiPardo & Freedman, p. 123)

***Sharing Writing and peer response: How it fits into the process, its uses and value***

In theory, the importance of sharing writing and peer response seems straight-forward. Writers learn from their conversations with peers and are able to improve their writing based on this sharing and feedback. So why write a paper about it? What's the big deal? In practice however, I have found that sharing writing and exchanging meaningful peer responses in a school setting are difficult activities for writers. Theoretical foundations on collaboration through peer response offer insights into reasons why participants in peer response groups can have thorny and unsatisfactory experiences in practice.

Peer response groups depend on a collaborative model of learning and working that is still new in schools. Collaboration and collective work can also be perceived as challenging notions of individualism and individual achievement that are important western world values. These notions are also prevalent in schools and may make it difficult for members of the school to engage successfully in collaborative work. Kenneth Bruffee (1984) points out that, "All that is new in collaborative learning, it seems, is the systematic application of collaborative principles to that bastion of hierarchy and individualism, the American college classroom." (p. 647)

Bruffee is a strong supporter of collaborative work for writers through peer response groups. He sees the promotion of this approach as practical and valuable training. Students are being trained for membership in a business, government or other professional community for which they will eventually write in everyday life. (1984, p. 642)

In addition to challenging the predominantly western world value of individualism, collaborative work through peer response requires us to think through our assumptions about the sources of

authority and knowledge. Peer response in writing removes total authority from the teacher as the sole reader and evaluator of writing. Peers are given a voice in the creation of authority and knowledge. We are forced to think about knowledge as something that is not external to our social interaction like a code of absolutes placed out of our reach, or held by a few guardians of truth. Validating collaboration and peer response requires us to see knowledge as the product of social interaction. "Knowledge is the product of human beings in a state of continual negotiation or conversation." (Bruffee, p. 646-647)

Challenges to our values of individual versus collaborative work and ownership as well as to our epistemological assumptions make peer response and sharing writing difficult in practice. As I engage students in these activities many issues arise that make it difficult for meaningful and effective peer responding to take place. To bring this discussion to a more practical level I would like to summarize here some of the issues that come up in my classes as I try to engage students in sharing writing and peer response. These points, presented below in an informal way, illustrate some of the theoretical conflicts raised above.

1. Fear of sharing writing: feeling shy or underconfident about sharing one's work with peers.
2. Not trusting one's ability to give feedback. (*i.e., What do I know about writing?*)
3. Not trusting in one's peer's ability to give meaningful feedback on one's writing (*i.e., What does he know about writing? He's just a student.*)
4. Giving fix it solutions: focusing on the surface structures of the writing and not on the content or the creative, inventive aspects.
5. The role of the teacher as ultimate grade giver may undermine peer feedback. (*i.e., What if my peer's feedback is exactly the opposite to what the teacher says about my writing? Whose feedback should I value more?*)
6. A sense of loss of ownership or control over one's words. (*i.e., Do I have to revise according to my peer's review? What if I disagree with her?*)

The issues summarized here reflect the conflicts that emerge between the theory and practice of sharing writing and peer response. A lack of practice in collaboration makes it difficult for writers to jump into the process without guidance and gradual

immersion into a new way of doing things. People are afraid of sharing their writing, a creation that is seen as such a personal and individual investment. The issue of authority looms largely in the act of peer response. Writers question their own and their peers' authority and the value of each other's feedback. They don't see each other as experts, the guardians of knowledge, so they question the validity of their feedback to one another. They are also concerned about the teacher, the figure of authority, and how the teacher will accept their feedback to each other. In the end each of them individually will get a grade given by this authority figure, so how are they to measure the value of their peers' words over that of their teacher's and the teacher's grade?

Often what happens is that students will give feedback to each other that greatly resembles the kind of feedback they perceive as "teacherly" feedback, points a teacher would make to a piece of writing. They focus on rules that govern the surface structure of their writing. In a sense this kind of focus is safe. It's clear cut, a reflection of the rules of English that govern, in part, our communication. This kind of "fix it" feedback is less risky, and also what students expect that their teacher might focus on. So this kind of feedback reflects what may be perceived as responses with more authority.

Finally the idea of writing as a recursive process is one that is sometimes a new one for students. So they may resist revising and think of writing as creating a product only, rather than testing out peers' feedback through multiple revisions and drafts.

In my practice of the teaching of writing in the Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts, I have found that these six issues repeatedly occur particularly as students are first introduced to sharing writing and peer feedback. These are some general issues that may also surface while working in an ESL context. My interest in this project however is to focus more on the issues that emerge when practicing sharing writing and peer response while working with adult ESL students. I turn now to my case study as a source of information and insights on the experiences of second language writers as they practice writing through a writing process approach that emphasizes sharing writing and peer response.

## The Case Study

I chose to do this study in a writing class for English as a Second Language students in the American Culture and Language Program (ACLP) at the University of Massachusetts. The American Culture and Language Program is funded through the University's International Programs Office. The major emphasis of the ACLP program is on developing conversational skills and an understanding of American culture. Students taking courses in this program do not pay a fee. The students come from a variety of countries. Some are graduate students and visiting scholars at the university and others are spouses of students or scholars.

The class that I observed meets twice a week, on Monday and Wednesday evenings from 7:00 to 9:15 PM. Terry<sup>2</sup> (T), the instructor, designed the course in response to students' requests for an opportunity to focus on writing skills. Influenced by a class that she took from Peter Elbow on writing and teaching writing, Terry designed a writing class for ESL students that would take a writing process approach. She began instructing this class in the Spring of '92.

## *The Setting*

The class meets in the quiet after hours of the regular university day. The first floor of the building in which the class meets is darkened except for the lights that are on at one end of the hall where a few other evening classes are being held. (Observation 2, p. 1 of my data) In the classroom eight or nine desks are arranged in a circle at the front and middle of the room. Terry keeps her books and her bag on the "teacher's" desk at the front of the room. She sits in one of the chairs in the circle. During my observations she sat in the chair in front of the "teacher's" desk. On a couple of my visits there had been writing on the blackboard behind the "teacher's" desk. These are usually activity guides that Terry has written up on the board and that she will refer to later in the lesson. It took me several visits to begin to notice what the classroom actually looked like. During one of my observations I took the time to consciously describe the room in my notes:

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<sup>2</sup> All names of participants used in this case study description are pseudonyms.

This room looks a little messy. The desks are the typical classroom student desks that have a seat and connected surface for writing. It's hard to hold on to many papers or notebooks on this surface and sometimes things fall off the desks. The desks are in disorder around the room. A few of the desks that we have been using are close to the front of the room and in loose order. Others are scattered about the rest of the room behind our loose circle.

At the back of the classroom there are papers and a crumpled popcorn box on the floor. A smashed soda can sits on a desk in the back of the room. It has the feel of a room that has been lived in all day, perhaps tromped through at times, with classes of students going in and out. It's a classroom with a transitory feel to it. One senses that people park there with their stuff for a few hours at a time and then leave it for the next group, sometimes forgetting or leaving behind bits of paper and trash. Not really homey. Yet I hardly notice it. I guess it's what I expect of Bartlett Hall.

Yet if I hadn't taken this moment to look around me, I might not have noticed the space. Within this disorder and messiness there is a lot of energy. It's the energy produced by the four people (five of us) intently reading and writing. It's very quiet when everyone is reading or writing. (Observation 3, p. 7-8)

It surprised me to notice this disorder and unattractiveness when I finally wrote it down during my 4th and 5th hours of observation. The messiness and unkempt surroundings were in direct contrast to the orderly and cared for feel that I got sitting among these participants over 10 hours of observation. The work of the individuals in this classroom was so intense that I barely noticed the starkness and dinginess of the classroom.

There are windows along one wall of the classroom that look out to the West. During my visits in early April when the days began to get longer, participants often commented on the beautiful sunset that we could see through these windows. One participant used this sunset as inspiration for a draft of an essay.

Terry usually begins the class with a short warm-up writing activity that participants work on quietly as members of the class trickle into the room. One warm-up activity I observed prompted participants to write a paragraph beginning with the phrase, "I remember... ." Another activity was a prompt to write a poem about food in the form of a riddle. The participants write for 7-10 minutes and then have the option to share their writing with the group by reading it aloud.

The warm-up activity is followed by either 20-30 minutes of grammar discussion and exercises or by continued writing on an essay begun in the previous class. If participants had been working on an essay the previous class, then they spend some time in the next class sharing writing and getting feedback from their peers and from Terry. If they aren't working on a particular piece of writing then they read an outside text that Terry has brought in. The reading of the text is followed by discussion and the beginning of a new essay writing using this text as a writing prompt. The final activity of the class is to spend 10 to 15 minutes writing in dialogue journals. Each of the participants has a dialogue journal consisting of sheets of loose leaf paper stapled together. They write in these and Terry collects them and responds to their writing. Days when the dialogue journals are not used are days when much of the class time has been devoted to writing and the class ends on a conversational note.

The number of students attending the class varied each class meeting. There were two students who came regularly and with whom I had the most interaction and who often became the foci of my observations. I also interviewed these two students later in the project. Attendance was an issue that was regularly talked about in class, as new students would appear and one time regular students disappeared. At one point early in my classroom visits, Terry involved the two regular students, Raoul (R) and Allie (A), in a twenty minutes discussion on the size of the class and how it would relate to their activities. She began this conversation with an announcement that they would have to make a decision about how the class would proceed if there were only two students for the rest of the semester. She offered several options to the students: shorten the length of the class, meet once a week instead of twice, join with another class, do more individual work, more one-on-one work. Raoul and Allie discussed these with Terry and by the end of the conversation they pretty much agreed not to change anything and the class proceeded as it had. The issue of who attends the class and the regularity of attendance is one that I explored with both of these students and with Terry later in interviews.

### *The Participants*

Raoul and Allie are both in their mid-thirties. Raoul is a graduate student from Bangladesh. This is his second semester at the University. He is also a published poet and fiction writer in his

country. He has also written extensively in the context of his work with non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh. Raoul is of slight to medium build, and has thick, jet black, wavy, hair, black eyes, and a black mustache. He has dark features and brown skin. He usually wears jeans or corduroy pants to class with a nice shirt, and sneakers. Raoul is articulate; although his English is not always grammatically correct, he speaks eloquently with a lilting accent.

Allie is a white woman from Germany. Her blonde hair is straight and is styled in a simple blunt cut at mid-neck length. She wears slacks to class usually accompanied by a colorful sweater or shirt and a necklace. She wears ankle length boots or walking shoes. Allie is not a student. She is accompanying her spouse who is on a one year appointment at the University. She does not work outside the home at this time. Allie speaks in a soft, quiet voice, at times barely audible. She engages herself in the conversation of the class in a quiet way and often stays in her seat during the breaks to continue a discussion with Terry while the others leave the classroom for a break. She speaks slowly and carefully and has a German accent. Allie told me that she studied English in school but she has never been able to speak in English as well as she can now.

The other two students that I observed on two occasions were Maria (M) and Zineb (Z). Maria is from Latin America. She is a small woman of color with dark features. She has mid-neck length, straight, brown hair and brown eyes. Maria has an accent when she speaks and her English is fairly good. She stalls at times to search for her words but otherwise expresses herself clearly. She is not a student at the University and I was not able to find out what her present occupation is. I later learned from Terry that she wanted Terry to help her with direct Spanish/English translation. Terry told her that this was not something that she could help her with in the context of this class.

Zineb is in her mid to late thirties. She is a woman of color from Puerto Rico. She is a student in Continuing Education and is also a teacher of Spanish. She wears big, tinted, rectangular glasses, that she takes off at times when she is speaking or after she is finished writing. She is short and has dark hair and dark eyes. Her native language is Spanish like Maria. Zineb speaks with an accent and her English is fairly good. She does not express herself as clearly as Maria.



Terry (T) is a white woman from the United States. She is in her late twenties. She is medium height and slim and has brown shoulder length hair. She also has brown eyes and wears glasses. Terry is a graduate student of adult education. She teaches at ACLP and also serves as the director of the program as a graduate teaching assistant.

### **Research Design and Analysis<sup>3</sup>**

In my first report on this case study my initial findings centered on major themes and issues coming up in the entire class' activities. In the first cut at my data in April of 1992 I organized and analyzed my data in segments representing broad categories of activities that corresponded to the steps of the writing process approach that I observed in this classroom. Part of the process of the research for this master's project was to review my data again with specific attention on how sharing writing and peer response is done in this particular setting. I looked for times in this writing classroom when the participants shared their writing with one another and how they responded to each other's writing. My hope was that such a careful look at these instances would give me insights into what the experience of sharing writing is like for ESL writers. I wanted to know what specific issues came up for them in this process. In this second cut at my data I looked for patterns and themes in response to these questions:

1. How is sharing writing and peer response done in this setting?
2. When and how does sharing of writing and talk about writing take place?

I have explained the first question in the previous paragraph. The second question here emerged from my reading of research done by DiPardo and Freedman (1988) on peer response groups. In this article the authors suggest questions that researchers into this area of study ought to ask themselves. Their arguments and analysis of this topic encouraged me to think in a broader way and to look not only at instances when participants in a writing class shared and responded to their own writing. I was also interested in looking at

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix A of this paper for a more complete overview of the research design used for this case study and paper.

when and how participants talked about writing in general, not necessarily their own. For I thought that this too could give me insights into the experience of learning the process of sharing writing and feedback.

In reviewing my data I found that there were five particular ways in which peer response on writing (questions 1) and talk about writing more generally (question 2), took place in this classroom setting. I will call these: (1) Group sharing by reading aloud on "low stakes" writing, (2) pairs sharing and giving feedback on an essay writing or a "higher stakes" writing, (3) exchanging papers to share writing without reading aloud, (4) student writing used in the instruction of grammar. Finally I will discuss what I have called, "talking about writing: the reading and writing connection." In this instance participants are not talking about their own writing but about other published texts. Yet the way in which they talk about outside texts offers insights into the process of sharing and responding to writing that is being practiced in this setting.

For each of these I will first give an example from my data and then highlight some of the characteristic features of the way that peer talk functions in the activities.

#### *(1) Group sharing on "low stakes" writing*

As I described earlier, Terry often begins her class with a short freewriting as a warm-up activity. She also occasionally ends on an activity of this type. I began calling these activities "low stakes" as I realized that these were often framed as a "warm-up" or writing for fun. The first time that I observed Terry presenting this type of activity she told the students that they could write in their own language if they wished and that the class would help them figure words out. (Observation 1...2) In the segment I am going to present here the participants were asked to write about a type of food without revealing the exact food item. So as they read their piece we were asked to guess the topic of what became a sort of riddle.

### Excerpt 1

Monday, March 9, 1992 (Observation 1, p. 3)

7:30 T asks if anyone wants to share their writing. You don't have to share. This was a warm-up time so you don't have to share. But if you want to you can.

Z volunteers to share. She says she is proud of her poem. She reads the title. It is about lemonade. She reads about lemon trees.

T asks her if there are lemon trees in Puerto Rico. She says yes and talks about this.

A volunteers to read her writing. She first says that we must guess what this is that she has written about. She reads her poem. She has written her poem in the form of a riddle.

We look at her perplexed and laugh a little for nobody has any idea what her poem is about. She reads it again after we ask her. The part that seems to stick in peoples' minds is the part about the bits of wood.

People offer guesses. I ask her if it is ice cream.

Yes, she says, but what kind, she laughs.

People offer suggestions. She tells us it is maple ice cream. But it has something in it that she is describing. She can't think of the word. She gestures the shape. She says it's a nut. T asks if it is almonds? She says no. I ask if it is walnuts? She says yes.

7:34 T asks if anybody else wants to read.

R says he doesn't want to read.

T asks if I want to read and assures me that I don't have to and that she herself is not going to read.

I hesitate but still feel like reading my poem. So I do. I announce that the others must guess what it is. I read my poem once and stop. The others have no idea what my food item is. They laugh. I read my poem again. This time T asks if it is oat meal. I say no. Nobody guesses so I say it is potato soup. "Potato soup!" they exclaim. We laugh.

At about the same time, Z says that she now sees that she didn't do the exercise according to the directions.

T says that this is okay, not to worry about it.

The instructions given by the teacher at the beginning of the activity reveal the low stakes nature of this activity. Terry asks if

anybody wants to volunteer to share their writing and she reminds the participants that this is a warm-up activity and that nobody has to share. One participant, R, declines to share. The other participants read their poems aloud to the group (five people that day.) The first participant to share, Z, tells us her topic right away, so she did not write the piece the way that Terry had asked. By the end of the sharing activity she does a self-check and realizes that she had done the activity differently or not according to the directions. Terry assures her that this is okay. In a post observation memo that I wrote after transcribing all of my data for this particular observation, I wrote:

There was a lot of animation in the room when people shared their poems. We laughed, and A. learned the word for walnut. Actually getting A. to write a poem in which she couldn't name the object that she had to describe enabled her to learn the word for it. (March 9, 1992)

A kind of peer response characteristic of these low-stakes activities is humor. Participants laugh, they chuckle at each other's poems in an appreciative manner. They are entertaining each other, performing for each other. The participants are also interacting with the content of the text and not focusing on the surface structures of the text, like grammar or spelling.

*(2) Pair sharing and giving feedback on essay writing or "higher stakes" writing*

As I described earlier in this paper Terry often brings texts in to read and discuss with the class participants. This reading was followed by an expository type of writing on a theme coming from the readings. This was a "higher stakes" writing not because it was going to be graded (there weren't any grades in this class), but because the writing emerged from the careful reading and in depth discussion on "serious" topics.

The example that I am going to describe here is a follow-up writing after the text, "The Beriozka," was read and discussed. This essay is about the author's experiences while living in the Soviet Union. The author is an African-American, and was a student residing in Moscow at the time. She describes the experience of shopping in a store for foreigners in Moscow. She contrasts the world of this shop, (an abundance of inexpensive, foreign products bought with foreign exchange) to the world of the working class in

Moscow. She also reflects on her status as a poor, black student, who can shop in the store because she is a foreigner but does not get the same treatment as wealthy, white foreigners or diplomats. They are treated with much doting while the writer is treated in a perfunctory and sometimes impolite manner.

I found the discussion that followed the reading to be complex, engaging, and provocative. The participants related the discussion to their own experience. This was a rich prewriting experience for the writing and sharing/peer feedback that was to follow.

In this sharing writing activity Terry gave instructions for sharing the piece of writing that the participants had worked on in the previous class after they had read "The Beriozka." Terry also had a piece of writing to share. There were four participants in class this day (A, R, T, M). A, R, and T had writing to share while M did not because she had been absent the previous class when the writing was done:

#### Excerpt 2

March 26, 1992 (Observation 3, p. 3-4)

T: Okay, here is the plan. The three of us have writing to share (A, R, T). We'll work in two's and share our writing. We'll comment on content but not on grammar. Talk about what you'd like to say about the writing. She continues to explain that afterwards she is going to distribute a reading. She also says that she is going to collect today's writing to look at the grammar. She says to split into pairs and then we'll switch.

7:23 T and A work together. A begins by sharing her writing by reading it aloud. She points to the new part that she has written today and points to another part of the paper, explaining that it comes after the new part that she wrote today.

M moves to sit next to R. She had been sitting next to me previously. M does not have a piece of writing to share. They fumble a bit at first, then R gives M his piece of writing to read. M begins reading softly to herself. She mumbles the words of R's paper. R tells M she can use a pen to correct, if she wants to. She reads quietly. Her words are hardly audible to me and I'm sitting about two feet away. M stops occasionally to ask a clarifying question about choice of words.

7:27 T is shifting in her seat and looks at M and R. She interrupts. R do you want to read it aloud?

M says, "He told me to read it."

T: OK.

M gives advice on which word is more appropriate, "adapt" or "adopt." Explains her understanding of the two words.

7:28 M finishes reading

R: "Did you find any relevancy?"

M. Mumbles a response that I couldn't hear.

R: "Actually I'm writing my own reactions to the text."

M: "Did you get any answer to your question?"

R: "I don't know." (chuckles)

7:30 M: I don't know what we have to do now.

R: We can talk about it.

M begins to talk about the article she has read. It is the article that the other members of the class read during the last class, when she was absent. She is talking on a philosophical level about the issues raised in the article. She is not talking about R's writing.

7:32 T instructs to switch pairs. She also reminds them not to talk about grammar but about the content.

M expresses surprise. "Oh we weren't supposed to talk about grammar?"

T: "No, that's what I said at the beginning."

7:33 The pairs switch.

A and R are working together now. And M is reading quietly. R moves to sit next to A.

A reads her piece aloud, softly. (I struggle to hear her.)

Sharing writing is done in hushed tones.

R seems to be hearing her adequately. He interjects once to get clarification on the pronunciation of a word A has spoken. A repeats it and he nods and expresses understanding.

R interjects a second time to express surprise about the content. He repeats the last sentence she read in an interrogatory tone, as if asking for confirmation of what she has just said.

A confirms her point.

When A finishes reading, R says, "That was wonderful."

R asks questions about the background to the essay. He wants to know more about her country and the issue she has discussed. He seems surprised by what he hears about A's country.

7:37 R reads his writing aloud, holding page so A can look on. He reads while following the words with his pen. He speaks slowly, and articulates carefully, yet without losing expression. He reads quietly, slightly louder than A.

R's piece ends on a question. When he finishes reading, A says, "Um, that's a good question."

R: "I don't know the answer."

In this sharing writing activity, the writers are asked to read their writing aloud to each other in pairs and to respond to the content of the writing. The peer reviewer in the pair also follows the writer's words by reading his or her piece of writing. They are sitting close together and read softly to each other. In the interaction between M and R we see that R did not read his writing aloud to M but that he gave her his essay to read to herself. She does so by mumbling to herself and commenting on surface structure issues in the text, the correct use of a word, for example. And R reinforces her reading of his text in this way by telling her that she can use a pen to correct the language. When they are finished reading the text the topic of discussion turns to the content of "The Beroizka," and not to R.'s writing. In this interaction M doesn't have any writing to share due to her absence from the previous class.

While R and M were working together, A and T were sharing their writing. A reads her writing aloud to T. When the pairs switch and T reminds them that they should try to focus on the content of the writing, A and R work together. In their interaction they take turns reading their essays aloud to each other. And their discussion focuses on content. Both R. and A. give each other supportive feedback: "That was wonderful," says R. of A's piece; "That's a good question," says A of R's piece.

Several issues emerge from this interaction of sharing writing. These are: regular attendance, the teacher's role in the activity, and the tensions between feedback on surface structures versus feedback on content. Regular attendance is important because with regular attendance participants practice sharing writing and become more comfortable with the process. Also regular participants are more likely to have a piece of writing to share so that when pairs share,

both participants are invested in sharing their writing, as in the example above where M. did not have a piece of writing to share.

The teacher's role in the activity was important in providing a model for sharing writing. T worked with A first in the interaction above and modeled the activity with her. When the pairs switched A and R shared their writing in the way that A and T had done. The teacher's reminders of focusing on content in this activity rather than on grammar also sets guidelines for the kind of feedback that are stressed at this early stage of the writing process. Later in the writing process, the teacher returns to grammar and surface structures.

The tension between response on grammar and response on content overshadows sharing writing and peer response. It seems that without much practice and modeling participants' initial responses tend to focus on grammar, correct language usage, and surface structures first. Content responses seem to be at best, secondary, if they are made at all.

Teacher modeling and the equal investment in sharing writing that regular participation offers are characteristics of the next type of sharing writing that I observed in this class.

### *(3) Exchanging papers to share writing without reading aloud*

The sharing writing activity that is done here follows an open ended, written follow-up to a grammar exercise. The participants were given a cartoon about which to create a story. The cartoon is of a living room in an apartment where three people are sitting and one woman is dressed in a pajama like suit. This person is serving finger sandwiches to her seated guests. Meanwhile a man wearing a mask is standing on a ladder outside the apartment on the balcony. He is peering into the room. This writing falls into the category of a lower stakes writing however it was framed as a follow-up to a grammar activity, so is not like the very loose freewriting warm-up done at the beginning of class as described in (1).

The participants were given 15 minutes to write their story and then T asks if anybody would like to share their writing. The sharing writing is going to be done in the large group rather than in individual pairs.



**Excerpt 3a**

March 30, 1992 (Observation 4....6-7)

8:14 T: Does anyone want to read?

Z: I don't know what you wanted with this exercise.

T: Do you want to read?

Nobody volunteers.

T: Says let's do something differently this time and tells participants to pass their papers to the left so each person is reading another participants paper.

I get left out because I didn't write a piece. They chuckle at me for being left out. I write a sad face to myself on my note pad.

Everyone is reading intently. T smiles as she reads. There are chuckles from individuals. After they finish reading the first set, T says, poor Cathie she doesn't know what is going on.

Me: It sounds like it's very funny.

They keep passing the papers until everyone has read each other's.

T Participates and passes her paper around too. Participants comment that her paper is hard to read. I notice that T has put a word in green on A's paper when it comes back around.

[OC: Participants see how T's draft looks. They see what a draft looks like. They see how writing is on the sides and above the sentences]<sup>4</sup>

T: Also comments on this as I am writing my observations. She says that this is the way her drafts look.

As this activity is introduced it seems that there is reluctance to share writing with the group. Z says she is not sure what T wanted with this exercise. T presents another option for sharing writing: passing the papers and reading each one and passing it on to the next person until each person has read the papers. I, who, as always, sat in the circle during my observations, did not have a piece of writing to pass around, having chosen to be more of an observer and recorder of the activity. I also was not in on the fun of sharing the writing. The stories that the participants had written seemed amusing based on the chuckles from different individuals. The

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<sup>4</sup> "O.C" indicates "observer's comments," my comments, rather than something that was said by a participant.

papers passed quickly and participants were responding with humor and laughter in appreciation of each other's work. Once again we see humor used as a response to peers' writing.

Terry models the writing process by sharing her writing. The participants see how her draft looks. They see that it is not neat and clear, that there is writing on the sides and outside the margins. In her role as teacher, Terry is demonstrating that this kind of writing all over the page is okay to do for a draft. She makes this comment to the participants and points out that the grammar and surface structures of the writing are issues that she will address later in her final drafting. By so doing Terry illustrates the legitimacy of a recursive, creative process that at first deals with ideas and content and returns to grammar and cleaning things up closer to the final draft. This is an important point for Terry to make as the concern for response on grammar versus response on content is constant in the process of sharing writing and peer response.

There was another instance of this way of conducting peer feedback in which I participated and shared a piece of my writing in this class. I had written it with the participants in class and when it came time to exchange my essay I did so with Allie. I guess I had learned from the last time that when feedback was done in this way that I had to have something written in order to participate in the class' activity. This interaction involved six participants, including myself. E. is a new participant, a recent addition to the class.

**Excerpt 3b**

April 15, 1992 (Observation 5...6-8)

8:40 To introduce sharing writing, T asked what we would like to do better, read the writing aloud to our partner or reading each other's paper silently (exchanging papers).

M said that she would like to exchange the papers but she knew that her paper was difficult to read because it was messy.

T said that was okay and that we would be able to understand it.

T also said that we should let our partner know what kind of feedback we wanted.

I didn't hear people asking each other this or telling each other what feedback they wanted.

So we exchanged papers. I said that I had a draft too.

T looked surprised.

I exchanged with A. M with R. T with E.

My exchange with A:

I exchanged my paper with A. She read mine while I read hers. Before beginning to read, I asked if there was anything she wanted me to look for or anything that she had questions about while I read. She said to correct words that weren't right. She didn't ask me to comment on content.

Her paper was fairly clear. I didn't really read the notes at the top. But these were notes, some written in German, she showed me. Her paper was about the use of cars in Germany. She talked about how quickly we jump into our cars, never asking ourselves if this was the best way to travel, never reminding ourselves of the damage that the overuse of cars has on the environment. She talked about air pollution and noise pollution.

When I finished reading her paper and she mine. I told her that her message was clear. And I did some "say back" feedback where I told her what I had heard her saying in her piece. I pointed to a few words that weren't clear to me. She explained what she meant by those words and we came up with some alternative words.

We talked more about pollution and the use of cars. She talked about how in Germany people drove around with just one person in cars; more highways were being built. She asked why we shouldn't be building more public transportation and better traffic systems. That got us talking about the automobile industry's interests.

T asked if we were all finished.

I said that we hadn't yet talked about my paper.

A laughed and said, "Hers is fine."

T had us go around the circle and talk about what we were writing about.

A started by talking about her paper. She said she was writing about the environment and cars.

I talked about my paper, about religion, and remembering things that I used to believe and now not believing them anymore and feeling somehow at a loss at times.

R talked about his paper, about writing and where writers find the inspiration to write. He mentioned a Russian writer and the 6 years of no inspiration that he experienced and how finally he got the inspiration from an ordinary event. He wrote a great novel. R also told us about how he got inspiration from ordinary things sometimes, the face of somebody in a train.

We talked a little about this together. M. said that that's what makes writers, the ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

M talked about her paper. She said she wrote about the sunset and some other things which she didn't name.

R said that it was interesting. (He had read her paper in the exchange.)

T talked about her paper which was about cafes. She told us how she started writing about coffee and cafes and how much she liked them. Then she told us that she had diverged into a silly poem about coffee that had made her smile. She said to me, I don't know if you were observing but all of a sudden I began to smile. I said that I had noticed this. Then she read us her last line which was something about being stuck and not able to write anymore.

E told us about her paper which is on the influence of school and family on children. She told us that she was primarily interested in following a certain pattern for writing: main point, supporting points, conclusion. She is working on her organization.

T told us to work on these more and that Wednesday there would be rewriting and she would collect them to put into a final booklet to share with the class. She said that we might continue with this or come up with some different things to write about.

T asked if our partners had given us any ideas to write about.

A turned to me and asked if I had any ideas for her to help her continue to write. I whispered that what she had told me about after we read her piece would be interesting to add to her paper. This was the discussion about the automobile industries interests, the fact that jobs could be had elsewhere, like in the improvement of public transport.

It was interesting for me to be involved as a participant in this episode of sharing writing. This experience gave me a different perspective into how it felt to be a participant sharing my writing. I acknowledge however that I don't think that Allie considered me to be a peer. She probably saw me more in the teacher role. She says two things that lead me to believe this. When we first exchanged papers and I asked her what she would like me to comment on she told me to correct words that weren't right. Then later when we ran out of time and I didn't get a chance to get her feedback on my paper, she said to Terry, laughingly, perhaps seeing the irony in the situation, "Hers is fine." Meaning perhaps that since I'm a native speaker and a teacher to boot there is probably nothing wrong with my paper. I noted in my observation comments at the time that I really wanted Allie's feedback on my paper. I wanted to know what she heard my paper saying. I also wondered if she could read my handwriting.

At the beginning of the interaction Terry asks us to tell our partner what kind of feedback we wanted. And I didn't hear anybody mentioning this to each other. My question to Allie on this issue once again led to a reply that dealt with surface issues of writing, what is not correct, rather than on the content. However in my response to her I purposefully gave her feedback that focused on content first and made a couple of suggestions on the use of a few words. As the observational data above suggests, we had a substantial conversation on the ideas that she discusses in her paper.

The individual pair feedback was followed by a group sharing, where each person in the group took a turn summarizing the content of her or his paper. Here the emphasis is on content. And again Terry models her own drafting, showing us how her prose varies from a narrative to a poem in her rough draft. She describes a writing process that is recursive and acknowledges getting stuck. Her modeling of this sends the message that it's okay to get stuck and that in this rough draft it's okay to wander and experiment and go where your mind takes you. It doesn't have to be perfect, it's not the final product. Terry ends with a reminder that this writing is rough and that we are going to continue to work on them and publish the final ones in a booklet.

I would like to summarize the issues that emerge from these two sharing writing activities. First of all it's important to note that this way of conducting a peer response activity emerged from the

teacher's flexibility in finding a way that would be more comfortable for the participants. This comes through at the beginning of the illustration of (3a) when nobody volunteers to share their writing and Z expresses some uncertainty about the writing activity. In contrast to the activity illustrated in (2), this sharing writing activity through the exchange of papers requires that everyone have a piece of writing to share. In (3a) I was left out of the activity because I didn't have a piece of writing to share. Having learned my lesson, however, I wrote so that I could share in the activity illustrated in (3b). The teacher also participates in the sharing of writing. This enables her to model drafting, to illustrate the ideas that drafting is recursive and messy, and that this is okay. Finally, the exchange of papers and follow-up discussion focus on the content of the writing rather than on the surface issues. Although as my exchange with Allie illustrates, surface issues are on Allie's mind and I directed the discussion away from them in my role as "peer/teacher." But the follow up discussion in general terms of what the writing is about leads to focus on content.

I've talked a lot about this tension between addressing surface issues of writing versus addressing the content of a piece of writing. In sharing writing and peer response participants have leaned heavily towards commenting, first, on the correctness of language. Discussion on content really needs to be modeled and directed. This competition between these two areas mirrors the tension that is often experienced in the composing process. Peter Elbow talks about the block that writers experience when they try to be both editor and creator in the composing process. The editor often stymies the creator by a concern for correctness, slowing the writer down and inhibiting the writer's creativity. So Elbow advocates trying to do one thing at a time, first creating and then editing. (1981) In sharing writing we are also trying to do one thing at a time, focusing on content on the earlier stages of writing and then addressing surface issues: grammar and spelling, and word use, in a later stage of sharing writing.

In the next illustration of sharing writing and peer response that I will discuss, grammar and surface issues are explicitly addressed. This sharing writing activity was an editing exercise designed by the teacher, using the participants' text.

(4) *Student writing used in the instruction of grammar*

Terry had prepared a handout using sentences from the participants' essays that she had already corrected with each individual in the class. In the previous class she asked them if it would be okay to use some of their sentences in a grammar activity and they had agreed to this. The activity resembles a grammar exercise distributed on a hand-out. Terry leads the participants through each individual model sentence that has been lifted from the participants' writings. The sentences are presented out of context, however, if the participants had been in class on previous days they may have heard the sentences in the context of one of their peer's essays.

**Excerpt 4**

March 9, 1992 (Observation 1...4)

7:36 T tells students that she put together a hand out of portions of their essays from last time that needed correcting, even though they had already corrected them individually. Since they had agreed that it would be all right to share their writing in this way, she went ahead and put together some examples of paragraphs that they could work on together in this way. She passes out the handout.

She invites the class to focus on example 2. She asks the class to look at the grammatical and stylistic changes that could be made. Also look for the topic sentence, she asks.

7:41 T: Does anybody have any ideas of how to change things in #2?

R: Points to the last sentence and gives a suggestion

T: (to group) Remember these are just suggestions.

F: Makes a suggestion to change "were worried" to just worried. She would like to take the were out.

T: Well, were could stay. It's ok that way. In fact the person that wrote this added "were"

(This discussion was longer than this)

T: Anything else...what about problem?

R: What is the problem that the paragraph refers to?

T: Yes, this could be more specific in naming the problem.

Z: mumbled something that I didn't understand

R: Isn't it right?

T: It's okay. It's a little repetitions but otherwise it's ok.

T: How about "on my out days of work"? How could we say this?

Nobody is responding

T: It should be my days off. What about the last sentence?

R: I have a large collection of potteries.

T: Ok, well is that giving the same sense?

A: I have too much potteries.

T: It has to do with excess. Remember when we talked about the countable nouns.

This segment of activity is characterized by low participant talk. Terry is doing most of the talking. In my observer comments on that evening I wrote that the four participants weren't verbally responsive or animated as in the reading of their poems about food that they had done previously. They were reading each other's segments of writing and I wondered if they felt shy about correcting each other. In my interview with Terry later in the project I asked her what she thought about this way of sharing writing. She said that she thought that the participants' egos were too invested in the writing. She thought that they were reserved about talking about the writing in this way and that perhaps they were not comfortable using their own writing as models for correction. (Interview with T 4/11/92)

In designing this kind of activity Terry was being responsive to the participants' expressed desire to do more grammar work and to get more correction on their essays. As I found in my initial report of the broad issues that emerge in this particular writing classroom, grammar and correct usage of language are prominent issues in the minds of the participants. During my second observation of the class, Terry engaged the participants in a lengthy discussion on grammar and what helped them with grammar. Grammar instruction and the idea of "getting it right" are important for non-native English speakers. Grammar is what is emphasized in the TOEFL and it's what learners of foreign languages grab onto for a sense of structure and



system. It's also important to consider the learners' own educational experiences in their native cultures. Writing curriculums in different parts of the world place more immediate emphasis on grammar than some American curriculums that emphasize process and whole language approaches.

Grammar isn't writing, some say, yet it's difficult for us, teachers, students, and writers, to separate ourselves from its influence. The study of grammar is ingrained in us since elementary or "grammar" school. We are taught the rules and the importance of writing by those rules. Yet the process approach of writing asks us to put those rules aside when we create, to relax the editing muscle as we focus on generating writing. In fact the editing, rule bound muscle constrains writing. So freewrite, we say, don't worry about how it sounds or if it is correct, just write. You can bring the editing muscle back later, for the final clean up, after you've created and generated. But it is difficult to let go of the tendency to want to clean up as we write and the emphasis on grammar remains in the forefront of how many people think about writing.

*(5) Talking about writing: the reading and writing connection*

I found in my study of this group of ESL writers that a rich source of talk about writing took place when participants read and discussed outside texts that Terry brought in to class. I mentioned these texts in an earlier part of this paper, under (2): pairs sharing and giving feedback on "higher stakes" writing. The discussion that followed the reading was content focused. The participants did not talk about the surface structures of the text. Perhaps their assumption was that since this is a published, "official" text there are no grammatical mistakes or misspellings. So the focus of the discussion is entirely on the content of the text. Here is an excerpt from this discussion:

**Excerpt 5**

March 23, 1992, (Observation 2...p. 6-7)

8:09 T asks for reactions to the text . Pauses... any thoughts?, she continues.

8:10 A: This is the same as Eastern Europe before. In East Germany. There were special foods in shops. It was not possible for the average

people to go shopping in these special shops except if someone from a western country could take you as guests.

R: My reaction is that this text reveals the truth about how everywhere there are class societies. Even in the Soviet Union where there weren't supposed to be any classes. The people were allowing the foreigners to be seen as big shots. But if even as a foreigner you did not have money, you weren't treated as a big shot. But the people didn't treat them as big shots just because they were foreigners but also because they could get something out of them.

T: "What do you notice about the writing?"

R: This is a personal essay.

A: Compares this to the other article they read last class.

A and R: Compare the two articles. They talk about how the previous article was much more emotional than this one. Even though they are both diaries, one is much more personal than the other. They agree that they are more drawn to the other article, by the Brazilian woman.

[OC: Comparison discussion takes place without T's prompting. Discussion just evolves into a comparison.]

T: Says she actually hadn't thought of comparing the articles. She mentions that the Brazilian writer had taught herself how to read in a few months and that might have something to do with the style.

R: Makes a distinction between the Brazilian woman who wrote about her total experience while the writer in today's article wrote about something that was part of experience but not the whole of it.

R: Says Brazilian article is unique in style. He could never imitate that style but the article today is easier to imitate. It's carefully put together.

A: I know a Russian woman now here. She says that now you can buy almost anything. So there are now goods, but people don't have money.

T asks some clarifying questions about this woman.

[OC: A is talkative, volunteering information. Getting into talking about her woman friend from Russia. She is animated in a quiet sort of way. I did not see this animation last visit.]

In this discussion the participants bring their own experiences into their reading of the text. They also compare, without the teacher's prompting, this text to another that they have read. They talk about the style of the articles they have read. R. distinguishes between the approaches that two writers take in composing their pieces. The participants talk about writing as readers and as writers.

They react as readers of a text and learn from the text for their future writing.

In describing how he became a writer in Bangladesh, Raoul stresses that he first became a reader and then began to write and publish his work. (Transcript from interview with R p.1) Raoul uses the outside texts in this class to prompt his own written reflections or critiques. He also sees another purpose in the use of text, that is to consciously imitate the style of other writers. This is a strategy that he has employed in his own practice of writing. He says,

"I was thinking that another approach would be to get people writing, just give them a piece of writing and ask them to read and think about how this writing takes a shape, what is the style, and people could imitate consciously, like the painters imitate old masters' works. When a student will start imitating a particular writing, I'm sure he or she will not follow everything, it's not possible. So it will take a different shape, so we can compare how it takes a different shape." (Transcript from interview with R p. 7)

In addition to learning about different styles and shapes as Raoul suggests, I propose here that gaining practice as readers of other writers' work, discussing other writers' work, is also practice for learning to respond to peers' writing in the sharing of writing. When responding to published writers' work these ESL writers were focused on discussing the content of the text and their reactions to the content of the text. Responding to the content of each other's writing in peer response is often overshadowed by a concern for correct grammar and surface issues of the writing. We saw in excerpt 2, on page 16 that M responds to the surface aspects of R's writing when they do peer feedback together. She turns to a discussion of content when she talks to R about the text that they have just read.

### Conversations with participants

I've talked a lot in the preceding pages about what I, as researcher, observed in this writing class. I'd like to turn now to the commentaries of the participants of this class for their reflections on the process of sharing writing and peer response.

In interviews with Allie and Raoul, I asked each of them to describe how they experienced sharing writing and feedback in the classroom. Both mentioned the benefits of sharing writing in terms

of gaining a different perspective or view on their own piece of writing. When comparing this approach to her experiences with writing in Germany, Allie says:

"But it's a much more better way this way than when we did at school. We work more on our writing. I remember when I was at school we had a topic and we had to write a small essay and then we gave it to the teacher and we got a mark and that's all. So there was no real response or real comment of what is bad, just to get a mark and that's all. So I think that it's better to have to work on the stories you wrote. Or just get ideas from people, not just corrections but also to get a different view from somebody so next time you write in different way." (Transcript of interview with A, p. 2)

In contrasting the old and new ways of getting response on writing, Allie talks about not getting "real responses" from her teachers in Germany, "just to get a mark and that's all." By contrast she explains that in sharing writing with peers one gets ideas from people, not just corrections but also a different perspective on a piece of writing.

Allie also talks about needing to gain confidence to share her writing, to get beyond the barrier of feeling ashamed or shy about sharing her writing. "But that's just a feeling and it's okay. I think that now we know each other so good so it's okay," says Allie. (Transcript of interview with A, p. 2) It seems to take time and practice to become comfortable with sharing writing with one's peers. So regular attendance is important for developing a rapport with peers that will enable participants to feel comfortable with sharing their writing.

Part of the shame that Allie feels comes from when she compares her writing level to her perceptions of Raoul's level. "He is much more better than I," she says, "so I feel a little bit ashamed, for example, when Raoul reads me his writing." (Transcript of interview with A, p. 2) On the other hand Allie also talks about liking to share her writing because it gives her confidence when another person understands what she is writing:

"But on the other hand I like it, because this sharing, because it gives you confidence when the other person understands what you are writing. I think it's a good thing. You have to learn to do it. Maybe it's not so bad, in the same way it's not very pleasant to read aloud for the group. Maybe that's a little bit worse. That's also a step and if you don't feel confident that's hard." (Transcript of interview with A, p. 2)

Along with expressing the confidence that sharing writing can engender, Allie makes two important points here. She says, "You have to learn to do it." Again this learning requires regular attendance and practice of sharing writing. She also points to the difficulty of sharing writing aloud, reading one's writing aloud. This is an even more difficult step if you don't feel confident. As we saw in the previous discussion on the different ways that sharing writing is done in this class, Terry offers options to the reading aloud way of sharing writing by having participants pass their papers around to each other and by letting participants follow along on each other's papers as they read aloud.

Raoul also sees the value of sharing writing as a way of getting different perspectives on a piece of writing. He too mentions the level of the participants as an issue in sharing writing. He says that it would be helpful if the group was at a more equal skill level:

"I have no problem sharing things with other people. Sometimes other people also contribute something, sometimes they throw their own perspective which is very interesting. And it would be really helpful if you have a group whose level is almost equal. It would be really helpful for learning." (Transcript of interview with R, p.5)

Raoul is not intimidated by sharing his writing. As a writer in his country, he participated in many writers' circles and forums where writers read their work and received feedback from their peers. He explains that he is used to being criticized so he doesn't mind receiving feedback:

"Always when I publish things in the newspaper [in my country], some people praise me and others curse me. I was a kind of a controversial one. If people criticize me I don't mind. When I was very young, it really hurt me when people criticize me. Now I don't mind, I've become used to it." (Transcript of interview with R, p. 8)

In the context of this classroom experience Raoul mentions the constant flux of attendance as something that he finds troublesome. He says that low attendance limits interaction among participants.

"The problem is that people don't come everyday. So sometimes there are only two people so there is very little chance to interact. But sometimes when 5 or 6 people show up, without 6, 7 people, you know you won't create an atmosphere where interaction can be happening." (Transcript of interview with R, p.5)

Again this points to the need for regular attendance as an important part of maximizing the benefits and feedback from sharing writing with peers.

Like Allie, Raoul says that he can get a little nervous when reading his writing aloud. However he differentiates between reading aloud to an audience of native speakers and an audience of non-native speakers. He says, "If it's an audience of native English speakers I might be a little nervous about my accent and how it sounds. If it's my peers, other non-native speakers, it's no problem." (Transcript of interview with R, p.8)

Finally one comment from this writer that stands out for me is his desire to be part of a group of writers as a way to motivate himself to continue to practice writing in a foreign language. Raoul says:

"That's the only way I can learn is doing more practice. And you know when I try to do write a couple of pages at home when I am alone, you know, I feel kind of fatigued, you know, discouraged, so it's better to stay with a group so at least I will write something and that will help me to learn. And I think it will take a lot of time to learn a foreign language especially the writing. It doesn't come quickly." (Transcript of interview with R, p. 4-5)

Being part of a writing group is a vital aspect for Raoul's own development as a writer in a foreign language. Perhaps this is one reason why he is disappointed about the irregular participation of the other group members. He sees that without their investment and interaction in the group his learning and practice suffers.

The experiences collected through this research focus primarily on participants who had a positive experience with sharing writing. These were the participants who came to class regularly. In my interview with Terry, I learned of a participant who had a negative reaction to the idea of sharing writing with her peers. I never met this particular participant, she was not in class on the days that I observed the class. She also was not a regular participant, like Allie or Raoul. This participant said that this kind of sharing was not good because the students learned from exposure to each other's writing, and their own writing was not good. She believed that they could not be models of good writing to one another since they were not good writers and that the teacher should be providing the model. (Notes from interview with T, p.2) In this participant's mind, the importance of sharing writing seems to be the creation of a model of

good or correct writing. This is an illustration of the "blind leading the blind" criticism that some students have about sharing writing and learning from peers who they don't consider as authorities on writing.

It's interesting to contrast this participant's reactions with Raoul's comments about the writing group and peer interaction as vital to his learning process. Even so Raoul and Allie both also point to level of language ability as an issue that they would like to see addressed in the sharing of writing. So here too is an issue of peer expertise and knowledge about writing. Do they feel that an unequal level will get in the way of their own progress in writing? Can a person with a lower level of language ability offer meaningful feedback about a peer's writing? Do peers have to be at an equal language level in order to make feedback most meaningful?

### **Linking themes from the case study to a review of the literature**

In this section I would like to integrate the findings from my case study with perspectives from other teachers, researchers, and theorists. I will focus on four aspects of sharing writing and peer response that stand out as recurring themes in this study. I will introduce each theme by reflecting on a comment by a participant of this case study and then bring in other voices from the literature who could help us gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of sharing writing and peer response in the ESL classroom.

#### *Responding on Surface and Content*

"So I think that it's better to have to work on the stories you wrote. Or just get ideas from people, not just corrections but also to get a different view from somebody so next time you write in a different way."--Allie (Interview with A, p.3)

Not just corrections, but a different view from somebody of what is written: this comment points to the double task of peer responding, to discuss what is wrong with the paper, what on the surface needs correction and also to talk about the content of the paper, to talk about the meaning of the writing. And as we saw in the case study, the tension between surface features and content is ever present in peer response.

It's not surprising really that this tension exists, considering the ways in which writing is taught in many ESL classes, with an emphasis mostly on grammar and spelling, and getting it right. And getting it right is very important in tests such as the TOEFL, where a thorough ability to manipulate grammar and vocabulary in exercises and test questions is stressed. "ESL students have been taught to focus on surface level, structural errors so they focus on that in feedback and are quite competent in correcting these errors," writes Vivian Berger (1990) in her study of the effects of peer response on ESL students' revision process. (p. 28)

Ilona Leki (1990), who has studied ESL writing and publishes regularly on the subject calls this focus on surface structures one of the "pitfalls" of peer response in ESL writing classes. She says that ESL students "take refuge in the security of details of presentation rather than grappling with more difficult problems of meaning." (p. 9) I don't see this so much as taking refuge but rather as needing to learn of another way of responding. In fact students, as they respond to surface structure issues of writing, are imitating the models that they have had for responding to writing: their teachers' responses. Leki calls this a pitfall when working with ESL students. Having worked with both ESL and native speaking students, I would argue that this orientation towards surface structures is common to many writers new to the technique of sharing writing and peer response regardless of their English language knowledge.

In her study of peer response groups and sharing writing in college writing classes of native English speakers, Karen Spear (1989) notices that novice responders also tend to focus on the superficial, the fixable, the rules. The factual and verifiable quality of surface structure makes it a safer terrain as opposed to the murky, subjective waters of meaning making. Grammar is more clear cut and peers have the impression of being helpful if they can alert each other to mistakes. After all they are doing each other a favor, catching the errors before the teacher does. They are responding in the way that they perceive or have experienced their teachers responding to their writing.

But peer response is not about being a teacher surrogate, it's about, as Leki (1990) puts it, "grappling with the more difficult questions of meaning." (p.9) And this requires reading not necessarily as a teacher reads (with a conscious or subconscious internalized checklist of what constitutes good writing) but entering



into a meaningful dialogue with the text. (Spear, 1989) Leki (1990) points out that when students respond as surrogate teachers they may imitate teacher responses inappropriately, giving rubber stamp responses like "work on your transitions," when this isn't really an issue in a particular text. But it may seem like the right answer, a "teacherly" answer. Another potential problem when peers see themselves as teacher surrogates is a tendency towards overly critical responses. Peers can respond as "cruel taskmasters and rigid conformists," says Leki. (1990, p. 10)

Peer responders need to learn to interact with each other's texts as an engaged audience, in the way that they interact with other published texts, such as in the example given in the case study in (5). In this example we saw that the participants didn't focus on the superficial features of the text but were engaged in a complex discussion of the issues raised in the text. They also discussed style and compared the different approaches of texts they had read. We didn't see this discussion as readily when peers were responding to each other's writing.

*Becoming Readers: What does it mean?*

Me: Just to have kind of a background, could you give me a sense of your experience of learning to write?

Raoul:..I became a reader when I was probably ten. And I started to write something by practicing, well, I was kind of successful and probably in 1968 my writing got published in a newspaper. (from interview with R, p. 1)

When talking about becoming a writer Raoul mentions first having become a reader. In his discussion of the importance of reading in learning about writing, Raoul talks about noticing the style and the shape of writing in an effort to, "imitate consciously, like the painters imitate old masters' works." (from interview with R., p.7) This is his own strategy for practicing writing in English as it was in his native language. The strategy hinges on a relationship to text through reading.

Karen Spear (1989) talks about an ideal reader relationship to be encouraged and practiced. This relationship is one of predicting what the text will say, interacting with the text, taking the reader's side and noticing how the writing affects the reader. She also encourages a progression of reading response that emphasizes

thinking about the reading from free writing reader reactions to more analysis of the text. She calls for a need to sustain this inquiry in outside reading as well as in peer texts and to encourage peers to treat published readings and their own texts similarly.

But doesn't a reader's relationship to text vary within cultures? When working with ESL writers and readers won't we encounter multiple ways of relating to text? The kind of reader relationship that Spear encourages may be biased towards a western model of reader interaction with text. The relationship between reader and text in different cultures may be affected or determined by a whole range of symbolic meanings and levels of authority embodied in the text. It may be inappropriate in a cultural context that venerates the printed word to enter into a dialogue with a text. This could be seen as a challenge to the meaning or "truthfulness" of the text. I am thinking here of cultures with strong religious traditions that are based on the sanctity of the written word in the Koran, or the Bible, for example.

In her dissertation study of international students' difficulties with analytical writing, Helen Fox (1991) discusses the role of culture in determining an individual's relationship to printed text. Among others, she cites the work of Osterloh (1980)<sup>5</sup> who, "based on his experience in teaching language to Third World students, emphasized the cultural differences in the way a text is viewed ("solemn, holy and incontestable" p.65), and opinion is expressed (collective opinion superceding individual opinion.)" (p. 45) How can we then prescribe a way of interacting with text without prescribing a western way of interacting with published text and by extension knowledge? We need to recognize the conflict that ESL writers may experience in developing a reader relationship that is in opposition to their ways of interacting with text. And we need to negotiate what it means to be a reader in a classroom of people who have as many internalized relationships to text as the number of cultures that they represent.

A related issue is individual student's rhetorical expectations based on the expectations of his or her culture's traditions. In other words, students, educated in a different cultural context, may have very different expectations of what a text is supposed to do and

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Fox, Helen. (1991) *"It's More Than Just a Technique:" International Graduate Students' difficulties with Analytical Writing*. Unpublished Dissertation. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.

accomplish and how it should do it. One international student participant in Fox's study (1991) says the following about her vision of reader responsibility: "It's your responsibility as the reader to make the point, not so much for me to make the point for you, otherwise everything's already ready for you, you know?" (p. 135) This reader relationship may contradict the U.S. academic expectations of how the writer should treat his or her reader\_\_in a more explicit and direct style\_\_than the style in which this student has been trained to write. If learning to compose mirrors social interaction in conversation, as Vygotsky and Bruffee believe, then it is to be expected that writers from different cultures will have internalized communication patterns that are not the same and may in fact be in opposition to each other.

Citing research in contrastive rhetoric, Allaei and Connor (1990) say that "preferred styles and conventions of writing are culturally determined." (p.22) An example they give is that of the concept of voice (authentic voice) in writing. They contrast this concept in Chinese and Western cultures. In Western cultures originality and authenticity are valued while in Chinese culture value is placed on "being united." (p. 24) Chinese writers use proverbs and maxims that are part of the culture and refer to folklore and historical texts in their creation of a collective voice.

Relationship to text and rhetorical expectations become important issues in a United States academic setting where students, presumably, want to become successful and respected writers. Leki writes, (1990) "Highly educated or educated ESL students are acculturated and trained in the rhetorical expectations of their cultures. Often these expectations are very different from the expectations of the American academic community." (p.12) In a peer response situation students may respond to each other appropriately within the context of their rhetorical expectations but inappropriately in terms of American academic rhetorical expectations. For the purposes of writing for the U.S. academy an "inappropriate" peer response can lead an ESL writer in a completely different and perhaps misguided direction.

It is clear that becoming a reader is a more controversial process than what is at first expected. And that becoming a reader in Brazil may mean something very different from becoming a reader in the United States. No way is intrinsically better. Each way is grounded in a meaningful cultural and intellectual tradition.

However, if a writer (ESL or native speaking) is seeking acceptance into a particular academic community she needs to learn the rhetorical expectations of that community. There's a huge debate about this and it sounds something like: we shouldn't have to change to meet the requirements of the academy, the academy should change to accommodate and respect the diversity of rhetorical traditions that its members bring. I respect this argument. But at the same time I think that one can't become a recognized and influential member of the academic community unless one does some accommodating to the requirements of the dominant discourse community. However, as stated earlier, this accommodation needs to be made with the recognition of the conflict that it entails for writers from non-dominant discourse communities.

By becoming readers of a particular rhetorical tradition writers begin to recognize academic writing patterns. And by learning to read as audience writers learn to take into consideration their own readers' needs. This skill can help writers to consider the different audiences for whom they will write in the academic community and to help them see how they will need to adapt to the varying needs and yes, requirements, of audiences in different academic disciplines. Becoming readers in such a way can aid peers to respond to each other in "appropriate" ways as they learn to negotiate meaning in the culture of a new discourse community.

### *The Role of the Teacher: Model and Cultural Informant*

"I remember when I was at school we had a topic and we had to write a small essay and then we gave it to the teacher and we got a mark and that's all. So there was no real response ... just to get a mark and that's all."--Allie (Interview, p. 3)

"Where I sit I'm still at the head of the circle, even when I've tried to change, it still happens."--Terry (interview, p.3)

What is the role of the teacher when peers respond to each other's writing? The traditional and sometimes exclusive roles of the teacher as evaluator and giver of grades are challenged and the teacher takes on new roles. Terry's comment above illustrates the tension or strain of taking on a different role in a workshop setting. When she first began teaching the class, illustrated in the case study, she wanted to be more of a facilitator, and less of a "teacher." But she felt that the students wanted her to be the teacher and as her words metaphorically tell us, no matter where she sat in the

classroom, she still was made to feel like she was at the head of the class.

Peer response to writing challenges the traditional role of the teacher. It asks peers to see each other as authorities and to rely less on the teacher as the authority. Kenneth Bruffee (1984) argues for the need of fostering a peer-based learning that takes power away from the teacher and puts it in the hands of the students. This is very difficult to do. And some students are bound to find this notion jarring to their traditional ideas of the role and authority of the teacher. One of Terry's students (one who did not come to class regularly) commented to her that she did not believe that peer response was a positive activity because the students learned from each other's writing and their writing was not good enough to be models. She believed that the teacher should be providing the model of "good" writing. (from interview with Terry, 4/11/92)

The issue of authority comes up when students compare levels and question the usefulness of feedback from peers who are inexperienced in writing in a second language. One way for students to be confident in responding from positions of authority is to build a common ground of knowledge or experience among peer responders. For example, in practicing response to published texts and peers' writing, Karen Spear (1989) stresses the importance of establishing a context for reading, something that is constant, a topic that everyone feels some knowledge or expertise about. This enables participants to start from a common ground, a single topic of inquiry. This common ground helps address peers' needs for a sense of authority or knowledge in peer response and collaborative work.

Bruffee (1984) also acknowledges that the collaborative work that is required in peer response is not something that students should be thrown into. "Organizing collaborative learning effectively requires doing more than throwing students together with their peers with little or no guidance or preparation," says Bruffee. (p. 652) In response to needing to learn how to work collaboratively, the teacher works in different ways and her role shifts to one of modeling and fostering collaborative work habits. She becomes a facilitator of the collaboration process to insure effective and valuable peer response.

Looking back on the sharing of peers' writing that occurred in the class focused on in the case study, we see that Terry often modeled peer response by participating in it herself, sharing some of

her writing. In excerpt (2) in this study we see that Terry's modeling with one participant facilitated the peer response activity between this same participant and her partner. The pair who had the most interactive dialogue about their writing was the pair that benefited from Terry's modeling. In excerpt (3) Terry models the recursive and sometimes messy qualities of the writing process by sharing her writing. The participants in the workshop see that Terry's writing is not neat and tidy at this stage in the process and that this is okay for a draft.

The teacher is modeling a way of doing peer response and she is also modeling the writing process. By sharing her own writing she is modeling the conventions of rhetoric in this community. The teacher can have an important role in informing and modeling the requirements of the discourse communities to which writers belong. In the context of the ESL writing class, the teacher can be a broad informant on the conventions of academic discourse. (Leki, 1990) And since one teacher cannot possibly represent all the disciplines of the academic community, she can still facilitate a learning of the conventions of other disciplines. This is a role that a teacher takes on not only in the context of an ESL writing class. Peter Elbow (1991) writes of the need that he sees for himself in helping his first year students in college composition see the variety of discourse communities in academia, acknowledging that he doesn't know all the requirements of the different disciplines to which his students will belong, but he can facilitate the process of discovery in these areas.

In the ESL writing class it becomes important to view discourse community not only in terms of various academic disciplines but also in terms of the rhetorical patterns unique to different cultures. This is an issue that I already raised in the previous section when discussing the link to reading in the practice of sharing writing and effective peer feedback. It is a touchy subject. For it requires writers to think in new ways, in ways which can be and often are in contradiction to their culture's rhetorical tradition. (Fox, 1991; Lu, 1992; Shen, 1989). The teacher can ease and facilitate this process by discussing the issue of culture in writing. What is considered effective writing in one culture and why? And what is considered effective in the host culture and why? It is important to develop a critical awareness of these issues so that ESL writers can understand what is being asked of them as writers writing for this cultural and rhetorical community. Being aware of this will also enable ESL

writers to be better peer responders and resources to one another, being able to predict and respond from the point of view of a member of the discourse community for which a writer is writing.

In addition to the development of a sense of authority and a common knowledge of discourse communities, peer responding requires collaborative working habits. In her work on peer response groups in writing Karen Spear (1988) stresses the practice that students need in order to work collaboratively. Collaborative work requires skills which are not practiced much in schools and therefore, students need to practice working in new ways. Sharing writing and giving peer feedback necessitate practice in listening and feedback skills. To work on these skills, Spear suggests role plays, developing checklists of effective feedback, practicing collaborative problem solving, group building and on-going management, and evaluation. Not all the activities she suggests have to do with writing. Her goal is to stress the practice and reflection on skills necessary for effective collaborative work and peer response.

Two challenges in the use of sharing writing and peer response in the ESL writing classroom raised in this case study are: the challenge to a teacher-centered way of working and learning, as mentioned above, and the cross-culture challenges of being asked to communicate in way that is unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable for an ESL writer. Allaei and Connor (1990), in an article that delves into cultural communication styles and conflicts, note: "As writing instructors, we cannot ignore the possibility that asking students from different cultures to participate in collaborative peer response groups is asking them to adopt communicative styles that they may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with." (p.22).

In addressing the first issue, James Bell (1991) writes of the need for teachers to provide structure for groups that help students transition from a teacher-centered tradition to a writing and response group approach. In response to the second issue Allaei and Connor (1990) conclude by giving us practical suggestions for facilitating peer response. They stress the importance of making the purpose of collaboration and sharing writing clear, to prepare groups with activities that will allow interaction in a non-threatening way, and to highlight and discuss cross-cultural differences in writing and communication and its implications to collaboration cross-culturally. They also suggest that the teacher provide and model ways for doing

peer response <sup>6</sup> stressing the goal of feedback as being a way to find out how an audience perceives writing and not necessarily to criticize and evaluate.

This section raises some of the challenges for teachers which are inherent in the peer response process itself and in the interface between peer response and culture in the ESL classroom. These challenges open up new role possibilities for teachers as models and cultural informants. These are roles for which there are not necessarily clear guides and how to's. In an effort to provide some clarity and easier access to the challenges and potential strategies, at the end of the next section I include a miscellany of practical suggestions and references for facilitating peer response.

*"You have to learn to do it."*

"But on the other hand I like it, because this sharing, because it gives you confidence when the other person understands what you are writing. I think it's a good thing. You have to learn to do it. Maybe it's not so bad, in the same way it's not very pleasant to read aloud for the group. Maybe that's a little bit worse. That's also a step and if you don't feel confident that's hard." --Allie (interview, p.2)

As Allie tells us, sharing writing and peer response takes practice. "You have to learn to do it," she says. In this case study the issue of regular attendance comes up consistently. And as I noted in excerpt (2), the regular attendance of two of the participants facilitated their peer response activity. They were more comfortable with each other, knowing each other better. Sharing writing and peer response take practice and a progression over time from lower stakes to higher stakes activities.

In her study of writing groups, Anne Gere (1987), stresses that effective peer response groups take months of preparation. "Establishing trust, developing collaborative skills or discovering those developed outside the classroom, and learning to critique writing constitute the preparation necessary for classroom writing groups." (p. 103) In her work with ESL writers, Vivian Berger (1990) tells us of her use of both self and peer assessments. She emphasizes self-assessment first as participants get used to working

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<sup>6</sup> For a complete guide of ways for conducting peer response, see: Belanoff, Pat and Elbow, Peter. (1989) *Sharing and Responding*. New York: Random House.



with each other, as they build trust with one another. She suggests that ESL writers need to ask for supportive and challenging feedback, focusing on positives as well as asking questions to elicit possible changes that a writer can make. Berger also recommends that editorial feedback should come last in the feedback sequence, focusing on content first. Finally, expectations of peer feedback and response should be geared to language levels of participants.

Effective peer response takes the building of trust and confidence. It requires the commitment of a group of participants who meet regularly and who progress from supportive to challenging to more analytical forms of feedback that is appropriate for their level of English ability. In his necessary ingredients for peer writing groups, Elbow (1973) mentions these two pieces of advice first: "Get a commitment from at least seven people for a ten-week stretch and make sure everyone writes something every week." (p.195)

## Learning How to Do It: A Miscellany of Tips for Teachers and Workshop Facilitators on Sharing Writing and Peer Response with ESL Writers

Here is a list of strategies and suggestions for teachers and facilitators when practicing sharing writing and peer response with ESL writers. These suggestions may be useful when working with native English speaking writers as well.

- Introduce sharing writing and peer response: Explain the process and give a rationale.
  - model with your own writing and a group from the class
  - show a video of a peer response group in action and discuss expectations and concerns about the process
  - bring in a group from a former class to demonstrate a peer response session
  - see Barron, R. (1991) *What I Wish I Had Known About Peer-Response Groups But Didn't*
- Form groups or pairs. Allowing writers to select their peer reviewers is my preferred strategy. It is sometimes necessary to intervene and mediate conflict and to reassign peer groups because of personality conflicts or incompatible learning styles. See Bell, L. H. (1991) *Using Peer Response Groups in ESL Writing Classes* and also Barron, (1991).
- Build trust and relationships between peers.
  - use ice breaker types of activities
  - stress regular attendance and participation as essential
- Practice sharing writing from lower stakes to higher stakes writing. Start with sharing freewrites or short warm-up activities and then move on to higher stake pieces such as drafts of stories or essays.
- Practice giving responses on a continuum from sharing writing with no response to descriptive responses, and then to more analytical responses. Develop a repertoire of ways in which to respond to writing. Some responses may be more appropriate than others depending on the writing and the drafting stage. (See Belanoff, P. & Elbow, P. (1989) *Sharing and Responding*.)

- Practice listening skills. See Spear, K. (1989) *Sharing Writing*.
- Give peer groups a checklist or a work sheet, stressing certain aspects of the writing, according to the nature of the assignment, to guide their peer feedback. Some teachers don't like worksheets because they can have the effect of limiting peer response to one word answers and otherwise incomplete responses in the "filling out a form" style. I try to design them with this pitfall in mind. They may be most useful when peers are first getting used to giving each other feedback.
  - Spear, (1989) has a lot more to say about practicing peer feedback skills.
  - See Raimes, A. (1987) *Exploring Through Writing*, for sample questions for peer response in the "Writing and Rewriting" section of her book.
  - See also Smagorinsky, P. (1991) *The Aware Audience: Role Playing Peer Response Groups* for a discussion on role playing in peer-response groups to increase audience realities.
- Use a combination of self and peer feedback in drafts. Emphasize the importance of self-evaluation and feedback too and the benefits of being able to ask for peer feedback in response to one's own evaluation and assessment of one's writing. (See Raimes, (1987) in the "Writing and Rewriting" section of her book.)
- Monitor peers' responses especially at the beginning of this experience. Comment on written or oral peer responses; challenge responders and writers to make the experience meaningful. Leki (1990) points out the value in giving students access to their teacher's reactions.
- Discuss cultural rhetorical styles and patterns of communication. What are the norms of spoken and written communication in the cultures represented by the members of the class? How do these compare with the norms of the discourse community in which these writers currently situate themselves? Compare styles using texts from authors of different cultures.
  - Helen Fox suggested that I distribute the article by Shen cited in this bibliography to a class of ESL writers and then to discuss it in class. I did this and found it very helpful in beginning the discussion about rhetorical expectations of different cultures.

- Terry Dean, (1989) *Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers*, offers the idea of making the home language a subject of inquiry along with other kinds of academic discourses, becoming ethnographers of one's own language.
- Have students keep a process journal documenting the conflicts that arise for them as they negotiate the requirements of new discourse communities.
- Provide a class forum for on-going discussion about the conflicts and experiences of students as they negotiate meaning in this new setting. Dean, (1989) suggests a class newsletter.
- Sharing writing by reading aloud or by exchanging papers?  
Remain open to preferred styles of sharing. Sharing by reading aloud has value in that the writer gets the opportunity to hear his words spoken, to hear his voice. For non-native English speakers, accents and pronunciation issues may make reading aloud a less effective strategy.
- Dean, (1989) suggests sharing writing and giving peer feedback when the author of the piece is not present as a face saving strategy for students from cultures where this is an issue. See Dean for more information about this.
- Practice and discuss collaboration and the cultural communicative styles that influence this process in the classroom.
- Practice collaboration through non-threatening role plays and collaboration exercises. Reflect on the process and discuss potential issues of success and/or conflict.
- See Spear, (1989) for sample activities and exercises
- Make a place in the class for on-going evaluation and discussion of the collaborative process in peer response groups.

## Future Directions: A Sociocultural Perspective

When I started this project I was interested in uncovering cross-cultural issues that are raised when ESL writers share their writing in the peer response process. Several of these issues emerged in the context of the case study. Some questions remain for me as I come to the end of this paper. In this final section I would like to discuss a few points that don't explicitly emerge from my case study but that I believe are important to include in this paper. Some of these questions have been raised by additional reading that I've done on this subject. I would like to highlight these points for future study and research.

### *ESL Writing Groups: Deficits or Assets?*

Some of the literature on ESL writing groups present ESL writers' cultural, communicative, and rhetorical backgrounds as deficits in an ESL writing class. Leki, (1990) for example, titles her article, *Potential Problems with Peer Responding in ESL Writing Classes*. (emphasis mine) The tone and message of some of the literature is that ESL writers need to learn new skills or ways of communication, that they need to adapt and to learn new ways of writing, and new ways of relating to text.

I don't deny that this learning is necessary as part of gaining familiarity of the discourse requirements of a community in which one wants to gain "writerly" respect. It is also important to ask what ESL writers can teach us about peer response and sharing writing, and collaboration? In this case study one of the participants, Raoul, is an experienced writer in his native language and part of his career as a writer includes sharing his writing and peer response in writers' circles. What can we learn from his and other writers' experiences that can contribute to a multicultural knowledge of peer review and how to practice this process in a multicultural setting?

In their research, Allaei and Connor (1990) conclude that different cultural orientations in writing and communication should be explored, not as disadvantages but as assets. Other cultures' styles of group communication in a collaborative process may be more appropriate to the goals of peer review and sharing writing than dominant patterns of communication in a United States setting.

As I discussed in the beginning of this paper, peer response and sharing writing are processes that challenge western notions of individuality. One of the difficulties of peer review work is learning to work collaboratively with our peers. Non-western students, coming from traditions where collective accomplishments and collaboration are valued above individuality may have much to offer to the collaborative nature of peer review. Western, native English writers engaged in peer review and sharing writing could learn from the experience and knowledge that their ESL writer colleagues bring.

### *Conflict and Struggle in ESL Writing*

What happens in the minds and psyches of ESL writers from different cultures and geopolitical perspectives when they interact with each other in sharing their writing and giving each other peer feedback in the United States, in English? This is a loaded question, I recognize, and introduces a complex discussion on a variety of levels. This question underscores potential conflicts due to the politics of location, gender, and of language that are present in a multicultural and international group of writers who share their writing. For example, what happens when Chinese and Tibetan writers share their writing and are asked to collaborate in peer response? How does the geopolitical and culture fabric of their background influence their interaction in the classroom? How do the politics of gender come into play when Pakistani men and women are united in a class where they share their writing and respond to one another? And the question that I have raised throughout this paper, what happens to ESL writers when they feel that they have to conform to writing styles and patterns of communication that may be in conflict to the ones that they have learned in their native cultures and languages? These questions continue to loom largely for me when working with ESL writers in peer review and sharing writing.

Xiaowei Shi (1993), a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts, is completing an ethnographic study on peer editing in ESL writing where she discusses this process through a sociocultural framework. She views peer editing and review as contributing to a process of ethnic identity development and acculturation for the ESL student in the United States. Shi writes, "The cultural diversity in the ESL class makes peer editing cross-cultural learning, which includes cultural self-understanding and

self-awareness, the expansion of knowledge of other cultural realities in the context of multiculturalism, and the improvement of cross-cultural communication skills." (p.8) Shi sees ethnic identity development and acculturation as processes that seek "to add new traits" to one's ethnic identity. (p. 26) ESL students want to socialize into the American culture, she says, without being "melted." (p.122-123) Shi sees peer review in ESL writing as a positive contribution to ESL students' on going process of self definition in a new culture. The reading and sharing of each other's works and stories influence each other in the fashioning of meaning and the development of a positive identity in the U.S. cultural context.

Min-Zhan Lu (1992) whose work focuses primarily on the experiences of basic writers in a U.S. college setting raises important reservations about peer writing groups that are applicable to ESL writers' experiences with peer response groups. She writes, "Language is a site of cultural conflict and struggle." (p. 905) Lu seeks to make explicit and to embrace the conflict and struggle that are present when writers from different cultures are asked to write in ways that are in opposition to their communicative and rhetorical traditions. Lu critiques the approach to teaching writing that strives to gloss over or get rid of this conflict. She criticizes the acculturation idea as one that devalues the cultures and literary traditions from which students come, by attempting to gradually adapt students to the "language, mores, and values" of the "literate community." (p. 894) She argues that the conflict and struggle does not disappear from students' lives. Richard Rodriguez' autobiographical account, *Hunger for Memory*, is an example of his own continued struggle, years after his successful academic career was underway, to come to terms with a cultural and linguistic tradition that was devalued as he "acculturated" into an Anglo-American academic culture.

Lu sees a danger in using peer response groups as support groups or as a transitional phase during which students learn to adapt to a new discourse community. This kind of use of groups, designed with an intent of acculturation to the discourse norms of a dominant discourse community, "keeps students from other cultures from moving the points of view and discursive forms they have developed in their home 'communities' into the 'literate community.'" (p.895)

Lu asks teachers not to try to get rid of the conflict represented by the clash of different discourse communities but rather to

embrace it and make positive uses of them in teaching a process of not acculturation but "repositioning." (p. 910) Students' fear that mastery of a new discourse could wipe out, cancel, or take from the points of view resulting from "their experience as outsiders," causes resistance to learning skills required in a different discourse community. So it is necessary for students to understand "why they are being asked to learn something, and if the reasons given do not conflict with deeper needs for self-respect and loyalty to their group, they are disposed to learn it." (p.904)

This argument emphasizes what I have mentioned earlier in this paper about the need to make discussion about culture and communicative and rhetorical norms an important part of the work of peer response groups. As Lu explains, it is necessary for ESL writers to know why they are being asked to write in certain ways, ways that could be in great opposition to the ways of communication which they internalized in their home cultures.

I believe that discussion of these sociocultural issues (the value of different perspectives and the notion of conflict and struggle) needs to go on among students, among teachers and students, and among teachers in a community of learners. As I mentioned in introducing this section, these are new ideas and levels of awareness for me. They both enhance and complicate my daily work as a teacher, but I welcome the opportunity to continue to grapple with them.



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## Appendix A

### Case Study Research Design and Analysis Process

The case study research that I did for this project was done in the context of a graduate seminar on qualitative research methods. Therefore, an important component of this project was to get hands-on experience in qualitative research methods of participant observation, interviewing, and data collection and analysis while pursuing a research topic that interested me. I first identified a research site and discussed the process and goals of the research with the participants of the site. After receiving permission from the participants, I began my data collection through participant observation.

Between March 9th and April 15th, 1992, I observed the classroom for a total of 10 and one quarter hours. The observations were between one hour and two hours and a quarter long. After each observation session I immediately wrote up my field notes. I interviewed two student participants: Allie and Raoul. I interviewed Allie in a taped interview on April 8th for 45 minutes. Then I interviewed Raoul on April 13th for 45 minutes, also a taped interview. And I had a conversational, informal dialogue with Terry, not taped, on April 11th. To prepare for each of these interviews I reviewed my field notes to date, marking activities or events in the classroom on which I wanted to get the interviewees' input or insights. By then I had narrowed my areas of interest to: pre-writing, writing, sharing writing, peer feedback, grammar, attendance, correction and editing, and dialogue journals. So I asked each of them about their experiences and insights on these areas of the classroom activities.

By the end of my observations and interviews I had written 67 pages of field notes. Midway through my observations and interviews I printed out two copies of my field notes and began to segment them into meaningful chunks and to label these chunks. I found that I had categories of events that I wanted to group so I began the process of cutting and pasting one of the copies of my field notes. I ended up cutting and pasting my notes into five categories: grammar, sharing writing/feedback, writing and drafting, classroom environment, and reading outside texts. I focused my analysis on these five categories and looked for emerging themes and patterns.

At the end of my participant observation time I was requested by the participants in this case study to present to them some of what I had noticed during the time that I had spent with them in this class. On April 29th I made an informal presentation to the participants. The presentation also served as a member check.

The final step in this first phase was to write a report documenting the research process and discussing initial themes in the five categories I listed above.

In the second phase of this project I reviewed my report and all of my field notes again. This time I concentrated my analysis on just one of the previously mentioned categories: sharing writing and peer response. I reviewed my data a minimum of three times and resegmented my data in the categories that emerged. These are the categories in which I have chosen to present the data in this paper.

As I look back now on the research methodology employed here, I realize that in order to do a more thorough analysis of the cross-cultural communication patterns of peer response and sharing writing a more rigorous and systematic ethnographic study of speech acts is needed. If I were to do this study again with a focus on the cultural aspects of this part of the writing process as discussed in the final sections of this paper, I would use a method of tape recording peer response sessions, transcribing the recordings and analyzing the communication patterns between peers in a multicultural classroom setting.