

Enhancing Student Writing Through Cooperative Learning in College Composition Classrooms

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Students' work tended to improve when they got help from peers; peers offering help, furthermore, learned from the students they helped and from the activity of helping itself. Collaborative learning, it seemed, harnessed the powerful educative force of peer influence that had been—and largely still is—ignored and hence wasted by traditional forms of education.

—Kenneth A. Bruffee
("Collaborative Learning and the
'Conversation of Mankind'")

As a former English and reading teacher at Argentine Middle School in Kansas City, Kansas, I anxiously anticipated the start of my teaching experience as a composition instructor at Arizona State University in August 2004. I wondered about issues of classroom management, pedagogy, and student motivation. I wondered if my teaching style would be too "elementary" for my adult students, and I wondered how they would react to the cooperative learning structures—like Round Robin and Mix Pair Share—I planned to implement in our classroom. My classroom experiences as an undergraduate student—though stimulating—were largely passive ones, in which I took copious notes while my instructors imparted

knowledge. I wanted my students' experience to be different. I wanted my students and me to form a community of learners who benefit from each person's ideas, encouragement, and feedback.

This is not to say that I don't ever engage in direct teaching or that my students never take notes. I do. And they do. But I try to make room in every class meeting for authentic, relevant student-student interaction, in which I am a participant or a facilitator, learning alongside my students. Throughout my students' composing processes, I implement cooperative learning structures, both in class and online, to provide opportunities for student dialogue and feedback regarding their ideas and writing. From generating topics to peer review and editing, cooperative learning has been a powerful tool in my secondary English language arts classroom as well as the composition courses I've taught—and continue to teach—at the post-secondary level.

Cooperative Learning vs. Group Work: There IS a Difference

As a student and a teacher, I've had enough bad experiences with group work to know not to inflict it upon my students very often.

Instead, I rely on cooperative (or collaborative) structures that engage my students in authentic dialogue with one another. In his article “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Bruffee attempts “to encourage other teachers to try collaborative learning” at the post-secondary level (416). He argues, as do I, that college professors and instructors should consistently provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful conversation with one another.

As a student, I rarely experienced collaborative learning in what I would call its truest and

most effective sense. Rather, most of my teachers assigned group work, requiring me and my classmates (usually 4-5 students randomly assigned to a group) to complete some sort of task or project for a grade ... a grade that we all shared. And, in almost every instance, one or more of my classmates conveniently forgot to meet various deadlines, forcing the rest of us to pick up the slack or else earn a poor

grade. Group work, sometimes inaccurately labeled “collaborative learning,” is endlessly frustrating ... unless, of course, students are permitted to select their own group-mates *and* each one pulls his or her own weight. How often does *that* happen?

What Bruffee describes is collaborative learning that centers on conversation instead of some type of end product and group grade. The conversation that Bruffee depicts includes actual spoken discourse as well as thought or “internalized conversation” *and* writing or “internalized conversation re-externalized” (421-422). He contends that when students collaborate in peer review, for example, they

converse with one another about the writer’s rhetorical sensitivity and their own connections and responses to the text.

Bruffee’s ideas on authentic communication are further developed by cooperative learning guru Spencer Kagan, who advocates a more structured approach to collaborative learning, an approach with which I became well-acquainted while teaching in Kansas City, Kansas. After participating in several local Kagan workshops, as well as a 2002 Kagan Cooperative Learning Summer Academy in Orlando, I’ve internalized the four basic principles of cooperative learning that separate it from group work:

1. Positive Interdependence—students benefit from and depend on one another for help.
2. Individual Accountability—each student is responsible for contributing to the dialogue.
3. Equal Participation—all students contribute equally; no one dominates the dialogue or is silenced by it.
4. Simultaneous Interaction—25-50% of the class is actively engaged (speaking or writing) at once, as opposed to the lone student who converses with the teacher during whole-class “discussions.” As Bruffee reminds us, “the person who does most of the discussing in most of our discussion classes is the teacher” (426).

According to Kagan, these four qualities must be present for cooperative learning to occur; and his theories inform my own attempts to provide an arena for meaningful student-student interaction in my classroom.

Cooperative Learning Throughout the Composing Process

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ple, when my students brought drafts of their argument of definition papers to share with peers, I began class with this writing prompt:

Who is your intended audience for your paper? What is your audience's stance on your subject or claim? What is your own stance in relation to your subject? How have you established your credibility with your audience in this paper?

After writing for approximately ten minutes, my students participated in a Kagan cooperative structure called Round Robin, in which they shared their responses within teams of 4-5 students while I mingled and listened. On this particular day, the small group discussions allowed students to comment on their reading homework, which dealt with audience, and they provided an introduction to a brief lesson on invoking readers and establishing credibility.

At the post-secondary level, this type of cooperative learning offers several benefits. Since whole-class discussions often involve only a small percentage of the students in attendance, many students (who may be uncomfortable sharing in large groups or may be simply apathetic) do not participate at all. Structured small group discussions encourage less-motivated students to participate, while providing a more intimate audience for those who may not be inclined to speak in front of a large class. As a college student, I appreciated opportunities (no matter how rare) to have my ideas acknowledged a smaller group before major writing assignments and whole-class discussions. As a composition instructor, I recognize my students' increased participation during cooperative activities as well as the support and encouragement they provide for one another regarding their writing.

Get Those Ideas Flowing: Online Collaboration

In addition to face-to-face cooperative learning, I also engage my students in online collaborative structures. You might be thinking, "How in the world can online communication fall under the definition of *cooperative learning*?" Using three of Kagan's four principles of cooperative learning, I'll argue that

cooperative learning can, and does, occur online. But first, let me explain what we do.

Using Discussion Board on our course Blackboard site, my students and I engage in a cooperative structure that promotes idea sharing and the formulation of argumentative claims and warrants. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Blackboard, Discussion Board is an online forum in which I and my students can post and read messages asynchronously, as well as reply to each other's posts. During the initial stages of their composing processes, my students use Discussion Board to post paper proposals and provide feedback for one another in the form of critiques (see "Paper Proposal and Critiques" handout). To ensure that everyone receives feedback on their ideas, I assign my students to teams; while they can read and respond to anyone's proposal, they are *required* to respond to their teammates' proposals. Below, Molly provides feedback for a teammate's proposal on euthanasia¹:

I think your claim is really logical, and is a great paper topic. One thing I think you might want to do is define what Assisted killing/Suicide is. Just because someone wants to die, is it right to shoot them, or stab them, to make them go quickly? or take them off life support so they die slowly, and peacefully in their sleep? Thats something you should think about. I think your reasons and counterarguments are sound. One thing I would say is that the person who no longer wants to live, needs to give consent in some form. Most of the times they are too sick, so its the family members who have to make the choice. However, I think it should be totally up to the person who wants to die. Defining what the life clock would help. Otherwise, you have good reasons and I think your paper will be really interesting to read. There are a lot of articles out there about this, so you will have no problem finding research.

—Molly, First Year Composition student, ASU, January 28, 2005

Interestingly, students tend to respond not

1. All student writing samples retain the writer's original ideas, punctuation, spelling, grammar, and word choice.

only to their teammates' proposals but to other students' proposals, as George did in critiquing a post related to animal cruelty and slaughterhouses:

I'm not in your group but I thought I would lend some suggestions. Often, I think that people in society are taken aback by what actually goes on at slaughterhouses, yet they take frequent trips to the nearest KFC to buy a huge bucket of fried chicken. Come on! People are so hypocritical. I know that you're saying that animal cruelty is bad, but what exactly is animal cruelty? Is there a "nice" way to kill a chicken? I guess it's an opinion thing, but why would you pamper a chicken that someone would just kill and eat anyway? It sounds morbid, but without some of these slaughterhouses, absolute chaos would break out. Prices on chicken would rise, and there might be a shortage of chicken. These are just some things to think about.

—George, First Year Composition student, ASU, February 24, 2005

After these critiques are posted, then I, too, provide constructive feedback for everyone's proposal ideas. This online collaboration allows students to share ideas and receive constructive responses from at least three other people, in addition to me, before drafting begins. I find that this is especially helpful, since, for many students, the type of writing assigned in ENG 101 and 102 classes is somewhat different from their previous writing experiences. In addition to providing constructive feedback, these online brainstorming sessions help me gauge my students' understanding of the type of claim and argument they need to formulate.

Using Kagan's four principles of cooperative learning, I'll analyze the degree to which this online structure is, in fact, cooperative. *Positive interdependence*, which suggests that all students benefit from and require each other's help, is clearly evident in this structure, as students are exposed to new ideas and perspectives and receive feedback that enhances their composition process. *Individual accountability* is easy for me to monitor, as I read students' proposals and critiques and note the quality of their

ideas, as well as the date and time they posted. And I've ensured *equal participation* in the design of the assignment, as each student is required to post a proposal and provide feedback for each of their teammates.

Kagan's final principle, *simultaneous interaction*, needs to be adjusted in an online asynchronous setting. This principle is more applicable in a traditional classroom in which time constraints limit the amount of student interaction that can occur, especially when the teacher employs instructional methods that favor lecture and student recitation. In an asynchronous online setting in which my students post messages whenever it's convenient for them, but before the deadlines I have set, interaction occurs, but not necessarily simultaneously. Since my online proposal and critique process exhibits the three principles for which it should be held accountable, I contend that it is, in fact, a cooperative structure that promotes positive interdependence, while holding individual students responsible and ensuring their equal participation on our Discussion Board forum.

Team Conferences: Structured and Cooperative Peer Review

Toward the end of the composing process, we engage in another collaborative structure that I call team conferences. (I've adapted this from ASU Writing Programs Director Greg Glau's "group conferences.") This structure requires that students provide constructive written and verbal feedback for their teammates' paper drafts, while I facilitate the discussion. To accomplish this, my students bring five copies of their drafts to the class period that precedes the start of team conferences and provide a copy to each of their teammates and to me. During this class meeting, I also assign conference dates and times and reemphasize the expectations for constructive feedback, which they provide on each person's draft and are ready to discuss before arriving at the conference.

Because team conferences take the place of traditional in-class peer review and peer editing (which would normally take two class periods), and because I believe that the conference

format provides more constructive feedback for students than the traditional format, I cancel our regular class for two days, requiring students to attend only on the date and time to which they've been assigned. My class meets for 75 minutes twice a week, so I allot about 35 minutes for each of the four team conferences on those two days (see "Team Conferences" handout). In addition, my students are responsible for posting a 3-4 paragraph writing response on our Discussion Board to compensate for our reduced face-to-face class time that week, although the time they spend outside of class drafting their own papers and responding to teammates' drafts more than makes up for the "cancelled" class. And the quality of feedback during team conferences further confirms my claim that this format provides more valuable feedback for students than the traditional in-class peer review and editing days.

During the 35 minutes of the actual team conference, we spend about 7-10 minutes discussing each draft (see "Team Conferences" handout). I expect my students to arrive to the conference, as I do, prepared to verbalize the written comments they've already made on their teammates' drafts. When it is time to discuss Molly's draft, for example, each of her teammates spends 1-2 minutes giving her verbal feedback before returning her draft with their comments on it. After everyone has had a chance to discuss Molly's draft, I share my own responses to her writing, which, depending on the quality of her teammates' feedback, could be somewhat brief or rather extensive.

Cooperative Learning is Here to Stay... In My Classroom Anyway

In all of the preceding cooperative structures, I am fortunate to collaborate with my students, rather than act as the voice of authority; they often come up with ideas and suggestions that would never have occurred to me alone. For example, when one of my ENG 102 students opted to write her argument of definition on atheism (a topic about which I know very little), I was relieved to see such detailed feedback from her teammates, including the following:

I think this is a really interesting topic, your argument is valid and readily defensible. You have sound reasons. One thing I might question is that, if one denies the existence of a god or religion (including various, more spiritually based orders like Buddhism, etc), what basis do they have for believing in the existence of a soul or other spiritual aspects? That is to say, what is their foundation for beliefs regarding spirituality? Is it merely subjective? A hunch? In my perspective this is one of the distinctions between Atheism and Agnosticism. While an atheist outright denies the existence of god and therefore any spiritual consequences associated with that god, an agnostic denies certainty, leaving the possibility for spirituality associated with whatever truth exists. I think once you elaborate on your reasons you will have a really good argument! I hope this helped somehow...

—Kristina, First Year Composition student, ASU, January 27, 2005

My initial fears that these cooperative activities would seem childish to my students have been dispelled; in fact, my students have generously shared their reactions regarding their experiences communicating with peers in our classroom and online. Admittedly, some of them expressed initial discomfort in critiquing their classmates' ideas and work, and a few students felt that they did not receive enough constructive criticism from peers; these are areas I will continue to address during future writing units. Yet the positive student reactions far outweigh these concerns. Students appreciated the multiple opportunities for feedback (both written and verbal) from their peers and me before handing in a final draft, as well as the opportunity to learn more about their peers, to listen to their perspectives, and

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to receive encouragement, along with constructive criticism. Below, Rita offers both to Kristen, whose claim involved issues of plagiarism:

I really like this topic! I think that your claim is concise and to the point. With the reasons and counterarguments that you listed, I find that I get confused as to what your stance is? Do you believe that it is plagiarism with or without exact wording? At first I think that you don't believe that someone can defend their accused act of plagiarism based on their rearranging of words and claiming it was a coincidence. Is this correct? If it is, then I think that as you get more research done and find more "reasons" those accused of plagiarism come up with, you will have more reasons to refute and can add those in to your claim. Deliberate is a very strong qualifier, I like it! Good luck!

—Rita, First Year Composition student, ASU, January 27, 2005

One of my most important goals in composition instruction is to ensure that my students are self-motivated to engage completely in their writing processes, rather than simply going through the motions of meeting academic requirements. Cooperative learning helps me meet this goal. As a teacher of writing, I do not want to stifle the voices of my students or force them to sit passively while I dominate every class period with my own ideas on composition. Instead, I try to provide ample opportunity for authentic student-student interaction so every student has the opportunity express ideas and receive contextual peer and instructor feedback, while attempting to convey his or her ideas and message more creatively and effectively.

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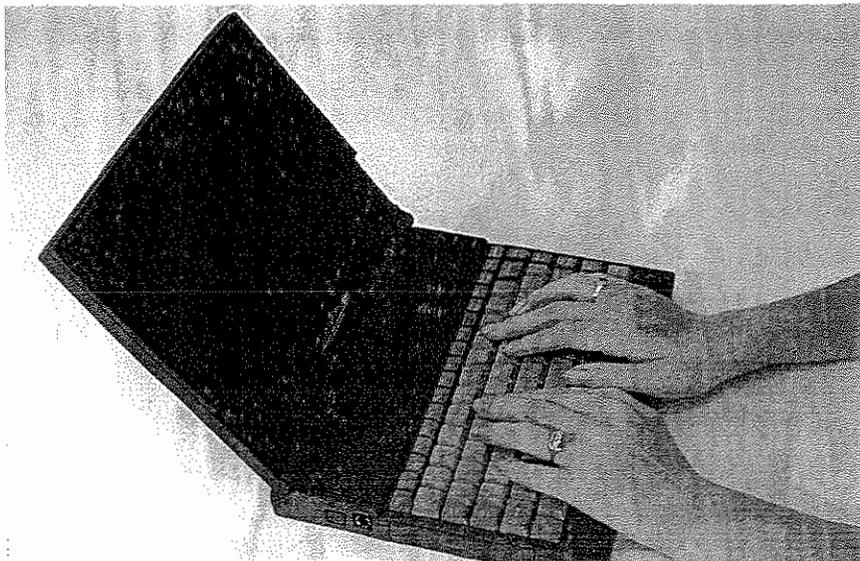
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