

Sweetland

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1139 Angell Hall
764-0429
SWCinfo@
umich.edu
<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc>

Writing Workshop by appointment

Fall 2000

Monday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Tuesday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Wednesday
9 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
and 2:30-5 p.m.
Thursday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Friday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Evening Hours

Alice Lloyd Hall
Mondays 8-11 p.m.
Mary Markley Library
Tuesdays 8-11 p.m.

Peer Tutors

Sunday-Thursday
7 p.m. - 11 p.m.
444C Mason Hall

Online Writing and Learning (OWL)

owl@umich.edu
OR
[http://
www.lsa.umich.edu/
swc/help/
owl.html](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/help/owl.html)

Writing Groups in Theory and Practice

by Stefan Senders

A Keynote Address to the Second Annual Writing Across the Curriculum Millennium Institute
for High School Teachers, University of Michigan, 18 April 2000

Teaching Is Always A Work of the Imagination

As teachers our work is to transform human beings. We create contexts, provide exercises, models, theory, direction, and critique so that our students might not simply *know* what we have said, but that they might engage with the world differently, and presumably, better, than they do when we first meet them. From this perspective, group work in writing classes is concerned with giving students access to particular communicative and pedagogical *experiences*, and with converting those experiences into long-term *orientations* toward writing, language, communication, and care.

More succinctly put, the tasks of group work are:

To help students to read, write, listen, and speak, and to recognize and extend their capacity in these areas.

To teach students to assist others with the work of thinking and communicating, and to help them recognize and extend their capacities as helpers.

To help students transform discrete *activities* they practice in writing groups into *durable dispositions or orientations toward language, communication, and care for others*.

Group work depends on and reinforces the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and helping. Most students, by the time they get to high school, are relatively competent in these areas. They are, for the most part, able to read texts for meaning, plot, and pleasure. Virtually all are fluent speakers of at least one language, and they are capable, if often selective, listeners. Most are able to write easily in non-academic genres, and have some

competence in academic ones. As helpers, though, many students have had only limited experience, and few have applied that experience within an academic context. Not many students, at either the high school or college level, are capable of consistently marshaling their powers to help others learn, create, or communicate effectively.

As I see it, the pedagogical task of group work is not, primarily, the development of "writing skills," but the development of *helping* applied to language. As teachers we can best help students by (1) teaching *helping-specific* modes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and (2) providing contexts in which students can practice and come to value the use of those modes. I will address these two areas in turn.

If We Only Knew: Techniques from Goals

What kinds of techniques work best with groups? What methods should we use? In this room alone, I would guess, we have combined more than 1000 years of teaching experience. I can hardly imagine a group of people better qualified to articulate and critique teaching techniques than yourselves.

But figuring out what we want to teach when we use groups can be tricky. If we are teaching more than "just writing" when we use group work, what is it, exactly, that we are teaching? I hope that you will take the suggestions I make below as points of departure, rather than arrival, and that they might serve as useful topics for discussion in your groups.

Teaching Goals

Writing:

Writing for a readership of peers and for an audience greater than the teacher. Writing *against* egocentrism.

Reading:

Reading not for what the writer “meant to say,” but for the difference between what the writer said and what the reader suspects she wanted to say. Reading *for* critique.

Listening:

Hearing critique as an *expansion of possibilities* and a *sign of respect*, rather than as the imposition of authority and a sign of degradation.

Speaking:

Speaking so as to encourage, guide, or reflect in ways that communicate respect.

This short list is clearly not exhaustive, and I haven’t tried to suggest exactly *how* to teach students these skills. I hope that in your groups you will remember, invent, and share your own methods. For me, the most difficult problem is simply to make the groups function at all, and that is the problem I want to address now. Assuming you know what you want to accomplish with your group, how do you get it off the ground?

There are nearly as many ways of running groups as there are instructors who use them; groups are highly sensitive to the moods, abilities, and personalities of their members, and each group has its own unique characteristics. There is, unfortunately, no science to the facilitation of lively, satisfying groups; methods that work well with one group may fail miserably with another. For me, the most pressing issue is to create an atmosphere in which students feel free and able to participate.

Making Groups Work

Over the past few weeks I have been thinking about the many instructors I know who use groups successfully, and I have tried to pay attention to the ways their approaches vary. I have come up with four variables—activity, modeling, rule, and frequency—which I think account for much of the variation. My purpose in presenting them here is twofold. On one hand my project is analytic; I am interested in *how* teachers run groups. On the other it is pedagogical; I think that by reflecting on these variables we may end up with a better idea of how to change our teaching practices effectively.

Ask yourself how you approach groups in terms of the variables below. How would changing your teaching in terms of them change the way your groups function?

Variables**Activity**

Low _____ High

By “activity” I refer to the level of action and energy used to create a working atmosphere. Some teachers use quietude and calm—talking slowly and quietly, waiting a long time before responding, shaping commentary into

value-neutral forms—to help students feel able to speak. I call this “meditative charisma.” Others use a high level of activity, what I call “energetic charisma” —keeping an ongoing commentary, moving quickly about the room, using a highly dynamic voice—to whip students into action.

Modeling

Low _____ High

Some teachers use modeling—posing many questions or criticisms themselves, or consistently reflecting or rephrasing student comments—in order to help students figure out “how to do it.” Other teachers avoid modeling, preferring instead to let students find their own way by building intellectual strategies from the ground up.

Rule

Low _____ High

Some teachers use rules to structure group sessions. Students might, for example, be required to offer a comment or question, or they might be explicitly directed to frame responses in particular ways—negative comments always prefaced by positive ones, issues of structure taking precedence over grammar or proofing. Other teachers eschew rules, finding that students do best when they are free to ask, or say, more or less what they will.

Frequency

Low _____ High

Some teachers use groups only infrequently, turning to them for a break in routine, a kick-start for a class with dwindling enthusiasm. Other teachers structure their classes around groups; the group is the foundation for all the work done in the class, and commitment to the group stands as a basic pedagogical principle.

I offer these categories not as a final analysis, but as a heuristic, a means for reflection and learning. How could you use them to model your own teaching?

Try varying your own practice along one of the dimensions. If you generally use lots of energy, try quieting down and see what happens. If your students have a hard time knowing how to begin and what to say, try establishing a set of rules for them. If you have tried using modeling and it hasn’t seemed to work, try letting your students guide themselves. If you have used groups only occasionally, and you’ve found them to be a distraction, try experimenting with making them a regular and central feature of your teaching.

Finally, I think that the most important work we can do is to help students recognize that writing, at its best, is not about “good” or “bad,” not about “expression” or “analysis,” but about opening up ideas, questions, conflict, experience, beauty, pleasure, and imagination to the influence of others. Group work is one way to work toward such a goal. ■

Setting Up and Using Online Groups Effectively

by Phyllis Frus and Krista Homicz

Text-sharing is easy online, whether the instructor or a student volunteer sets up a class email list, establishes Conferencing On the Web (COW), or creates a course site on CourseTools, the University's newly deployed Web environment. If you're going to require online discussion or exchange of drafts on email, try to schedule your class in one of the wired rooms a few times early in the course. Send an email to sites.reservations@umich.edu requesting the classroom. Give several dates at the time the course meets so that your class can be accommodated.

CourseTools

To create a course Web site, go to <https://coursetools.ummu.umich.edu> and set up a "workspace." Documentation is available on this page, including "UM.CourseTools Overview" and "Using Discussion and Groups in CourseTools."

When you set up a course Web page on CourseTools all the students enrolled in the class have access to the site as soon as you have published it, usually within a day. (You can work on it in your private workspace until you are ready to publish it and change it afterward as well, adding categories for discussion as well as links.)

COW (Conferencing on the Web)

To establish a COW for your course, go to <https://calypso.rs.itd.umich.edu/COW>. The COW can be open or closed. (If you leave it open, students have to sign up for it; if it's closed, you or a GSI will have to enter the usernames of everyone in the class.)

Setting up a class email list

The two technology basics of online collaboration are setting up a class email list and making sure students know how to copy and paste a response or draft from their word processing program to the list and thus to everyone in the class. (To be able to retrieve drafts from any computer on campus, students should also know how to save their work in their IFS home directory.) If you use CourseTools, students should have these skills as well, and you may also want to have a class email list. Many students check their email more frequently than they get on the Web.

The easiest way to make and manage email groups is through the university directory. This web-based way is much clearer than Wax 500—you can see just what you're doing, you don't have to know any commands, and you can set up or manage the group from computers at home or on campus.

First access the umich directory on the web at <http://directory.umich.edu>. Or from the university main web page,

go to "Students Faculty and Staff" and find your own page (and bookmark it). Click on the YOU button and log in with your username and password. Follow the user-friendly directions for creating a group.

Students should be given guidelines on using an email group. See, for example, "Netiquette," a page on how to use an email group on Professor Kathryn Tosney's Biology 208 website: <http://biology.lsa.umich.edu/~www/bio208/file/egroup.html>.

Effective Online Groups

One of the advantages of collaborating online—for example, posting a draft for peer response after brainstorming with the group—is that insights first expressed orally in face-to-face (f2f) encounters get written down. Because no one makes exactly the same point when repeating it, ideas are revised in the act of writing, and the "first" draft isn't the first attempt at expressing ideas.

When groups post their work on a Web-based course discussion page, each student sees a variety of responses to an assignment or a reading. Since we learn by example and imitation, sharing responses can increase a student's repertoire of writing strategies. In the ECB300.01 Peer Tutor Seminar in fall 1999, students debated the question posed by an essay, "How can grammar be used as a device for thinking about the meaning of a paper instead of a tool that dictates a right or wrong answer?" After much give-and-take on CourseTools, where students can post a topic and others can respond to it or to another response, the writers had taken various positions on the question, thus increasing their writing choices as well as their tutoring repertoire.

Students can also respond to group members' drafts outside of class, thus extending the boundaries of the classroom. Kenya Mayfield, former Sweetland Junior Fellow who compiled a resource guide for anthropologists planning and teaching Advanced Writing in the Disciplines (AWD) courses, says that when AWD students are in a section with students who are not taking the course to meet the upper-level writing requirement, instructors can set up an email group for AWD students, who can then exchange drafts and comments with one another online.

Some instructors set up a COW site. For example, in Winter 2000 Rosemary Kowalski, lecturer in English, started an "open" or joinable COW for English 412: Major Directors: Allen and Altman. Students were required to post a comment about the film they had just seen, and then to respond to one other comment. They were asked to divide features of the films among themselves, with one group taking cinematography, another sound, another dialogue, and so on. More aspects of the film got discussed thoroughly, for the group members also led class discussion on their topic.

Another benefit of collaborative work is that everyone in the group contributes. Although researchers have found

that in groups of five or more, a couple of students still dominate discussion, when students are required to participate in electronic discussion, even the most reticent speaker contributes.

Instructors have found various ways to encourage online conversation, but the general consensus is that it must be required—that is, count as a significant percentage of students' course grade. It's a good idea for the instructor to participate, responding to postings, and meting out praise as well as prodding students for more analysis or information on the topic.

—Phyllis Frus

Teaching Tips for Online Classrooms

Here are some tips for setting up online activities:

- Make sure that you plan the class from the outset with the online activities in mind. Your course syllabus should indicate your expectations about this valuable component in your teaching practice. I recommend including the online component in the course syllabus as a good percentage of the grade, so students know that it matters. Last term I made online discussions 15 percent of their final grade, and I continually reminded them that it was a big factor in my assessment. In my grading scale, C is average, while an A is earned by effort. This helps students realize that an A grade is based on helping others to learn, and that learning is a social process.
- It's a good idea to make online discussion be regular and routine, so that students get in the habit of knowing that working in the course web site is important. The online activities should be "lead-ins" to in-class activities. I sometimes require peer critiques to be done online before the students come to class, as preparation for in-class peer discussion in groups. I also have students discuss readings online to prepare for the next class discussion of those readings.
- Remember to allow reasonable amounts of time for completing the assignment. I usually assign the online discussion for weekend homework, saying that class members must post something by Saturday, and then respond to each other before next Monday's class. I've learned not to leave too much time for students to get the assignment done because they have a tendency to forget to look at the web site.
- Consider asking students to reflect on how the course site, or any technology, affects their writing process. We ask for reflections in writing courses about how students are progressing in their writing; why not get them to reflect on how their writing or their learning is aided by technology? This encourages students to regard technology as a pedagogical tool and as an important part of the class structure. Reflection should enable them to see that technology reinforces the idea that writing and learning are social processes, that writing

involves an awareness of audience, and that arguments must be supported in order to persuade.

Responding Online

Students' postings

- Don't feel the need to develop specific questions or assign topics to the students. I like to let the conversation start from their own reactions to the readings.
- Have the students choose groups in class. For homework, each group member posts a response to the readings. Then, they are responsible for returning to the site and responding to what their group members posted. If they don't respond to their group's posting, they have let down their group members, not just the teacher.
- If you don't use groups, have the students respond to the two people above their posting, to form random groupings.

Instructor's response

- You do not need to respond to all postings.
- You need respond to groups only once, after all students have posted and can synthesize ideas or pose questions to the whole group about everyone's conclusions.
- If the students are responding to one another in a group on one assignment, tell them that for this assignment you will give them a group grade based on the level of insightful responses and activity in their online discussion.
- The instructor can scaffold students' responses. By using the term "scaffolding," I am referring to Vygotsky's educational theory of students learning by interacting and negotiating information with others who have a stronger knowledge base. The teacher can choose which students' responses are strong and exemplary and then respond to the strong students with praise, pointing out what was good about their postings. Other students will notice whose responses were picked up and what kind of work the teacher is looking for. The goal is to use the highlighted response as a model for the kind of work students should do.
- The instructor should bring what the students say online into the class discussion to show them their online work is valuable. You can use what they've posted as a jumping-off point for in-class discussion, or by continually referring to students and their responses.

Making online student groups work is mostly about teaching students that the instructor is not the sole authority on thoughts and opinions, and that students can learn by interacting with others and by judging which are the best responses or most convincing arguments out of many choices.

—Krista Homicz