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# *LOCATIONS*

HEPHZIBAH ROSKELLY

## The Risky Business of Group Work

All of us compositionists believe in group work. In this post-Vygotskian. postage it's impossible not to. The terms that dominate our collective conversation in conferences and in our journals—collaboration, peer response, discourse community, shared knowledge—have become symbols for a pedagogical agenda that values talk and activity as learning tools. And Vygotsky, Freire and others provide strong underpinning for our conversation, with the clear link they make between social interaction and learning. A person learns in a group as he listens and speaks, and he learns about himself as well as the culture he inhabits. He may act to change that culture; he most certainly will be changed by it.

Three anecdotes:

Last semester I ask students to write about their past experiences with group work. "One person did all the work," a young woman writes. "It was me. Seems like the teacher counts on the 'smart kid' to keep the others in line. But most of them read the paper in my group."

A few months ago I conduct a workshop for teachers where we talk about the value of group work. They believe in group work they tell me. But they don't use it much. I ask why. "I feel so pressed for time. And group work takes it up." "I feel guilty when I'm not actually teaching." "I'm afraid they'll start socializing."

This year I come up for tenure. I have to write—and ask my co-authors to write—a defense of the collaborative work we've accomplished. How much did you do? is the question. Some of my colleagues are nonplussed by my own and my collaborators' inability to divide up our contributions.

Whatever our belief in group work, and in the collaboration that ensues from it, we haven't translated that belief very effectively to our classrooms, to other educators, to administrations. The gap between talk about groups and talk in groups looms large. I want to argue here that such a gap exists because the purposes of group work are deeply in conflict, and that our refusal to acknowledge and mediate those conflicts has constrained the methods of group work and blunted its effectiveness.

In his moving account of education and literacy, *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose

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describes students, including himself as a boy, who are sidelined in the academic game by the way their lives separate them from mainstream educational values. The answer? "My students needed to be immersed in talking, reading and writing, they needed to further develop their ability to think critically, and they needed to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers. They had to be let into the academic club" (141). Paulo Freire's students live farther out on the boundary than the disadvantaged in Southern California, in isolated villages and farms in Brazil or Guinnea-Bissau or Cape Verde, but they're outsiders for the same reasons as Rose's students. Freire's plan for their education; that is, their involvement in the discourse of academic literacy, includes more than immersion, inquiry and admission. It it is to "make visible the language, dreams, values and encounters that constitute lives and transforms the structure in which those contexts are placed" (105). The conflict in aims is clear. Does the group work toward socialization—being let into the "academic club"—or conscientization—transforming structures by asserting the value of those without membership?

These two aims—socializing and criticizing—are almost always separate and opposed, even for teachers and theorists who claim both as goals of group work. And many recognize it. Peter Elbow's may be the most honest account of the conflict. In "Pedagogy of the Bamboozled," Elbow wrestles with the problem of how a teacher can both challenge institutional goals through encouraging students to question them and work in an institution. He admits that liberation—Freire's aim—and preservation—the institution's aim—usually match poorly. "We have very little pedagogy truly designed to liberate, and we need more. But in all truth we must admit to ourselves that few of us, because of our temperaments and because of our institutional setting, are in a position to offer it (93). Taking a programmatic rather than pedagogical angle, Daniel Mahala describes the same anomaly as he assesses the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, puzzling over the paradox of WAC goals that promote the valuing of student knowledge while assuring that "writing to learn does not mean changing course content." Mahala is not concerned with group work primarily, but his conclusions about the WAC movement coincide precisely with our concern here. "The question we beg, of course," he says, "is how can we call the knowledge students find their own, if we are assuring our colleagues that writing to learn does mean changing course content?" (778). How can students liberate themselves and indoctrinate themselves at the same time?

Kenneth Bruffee, whose work for years has advocated the methods and goals of group work, is well aware of those double and conflicting aims. In "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind," Bruffee begins his argument for the value of group approaches with a short history of the growth of collaboration. The London Schools Project, an early collaborative attempt "sprang from a desire to democratize education by loosening destructive authoritarian forms" (636). Students decided on their own work. Teachers helped them. The agenda for the London students is clearly political one would say. And clearly aimed toward a Freirean conscientization, challenging structures by asserting the power of groups within them. But Bruffee is quick to add that for American college teachers "the roots of collaborative learning lie neither in radical politics nor in research." They come in desperate response to a "pressing educational need."

Support for educational need as the agenda for group work appears to come from Bruffee's description of the research of M. L. J. Abercrombie, a British physician training medical students, who discovered that diagnoses improved when students talked together rather than listened to the physician in charge. Abercrombie's work establishes the educational value of group problem solving. But Bruffee ignores the political implications of that group activity, and his carefully argued study ends by giving the win to "educational need" over politics in the conflict he admits to but downplays. "We should contrive to ensure that students' conversations about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write" (650). In spite of the way students' own discourse gets valued through the group (as they use their "abnormal discourse," a term Bruffee alters from Richard Rorty), in spite of the way teachers strive to meet both the need to maintain knowledge and to challenge it, the institution gets the final say: students become reacculturated as they loosen ties to their own communities and form other ties, academic and institutional. If we recognize that students operate with a discourse unlike the talk of academics, the group functions as a way of allowing "abnormal discourse" while eventually privileging the "normal discourse" of the field.



Yet picture the scene around the patient's bed at University Hospital, London the day before Dr. Abercrombie tries her new approach. The lead physician stands at the head of the bed, explaining the case, giving the terms. She then questions, waiting for hands to go up to suggest diagnosis. She calls on one, then another and another, and then she assesses the conclusions each individual has offered, nodding to the most correct responder, and maybe giving an encouraging pat on the shoulder to the patient. See the same scene a week later. Students look at the material on the patient, then look up, begin to talk hesitantly at first perhaps, explaining the status of the patient and offering suggestions about causes. Maybe one or two disagree and a third mediates. They conclude and nod to one another.

What has happened is more than a shift in educational practice that values talk, interaction and consensus. Nobody raises a hand to speak. Even more important, the teacher/physician is not at the head of the bed. Grouped around the patient, students do more than decide cause and treatment, presumably the teacher's agenda. They decide matters of greater potential educational significance. What terms do we use to describe causes? What counts as relevant information? How are we to make decisions about the problem? All of those decisions create new responsibilities for students, accustomed to having the answers to them already ordained. The dynamic has altered radically: institutional tradition that assigns sources of knowledge and social code to one authority has suddenly disappeared within the group.

It's this physical difference in the classroom that makes the small group revolutionary in the institutional setting, for the way in which it implies a criticism of institutional structure. There is suddenly no front of the room. The teacher in this small group setting is, as Bruffee asserts, both "agent for change and conservator of institutional value," but that position is far from comfortable. She doesn't know where to stand. As Elbow indicates, it leads to "bamboozlement." We use the group but distrust it, as Bruffee finds. We say we value talk but we don't allow much, as studies from Shirley Brice Heath to the report from the Dartmouth Conference at NCTE in 1991 indicate: students talk far less than teachers, and teachers talk more than 75% of the time. Classrooms then remain locked into the question/response/lecture/silence dynamic that limits talk or makes it adversarial.

It's not surprising, as Elbow suggests, that Freire's success with the group occurs

primarily outside the institutional setting because the conflict of aims is palpable within it. Anne Gere's study of writing groups echoes Elbow's insight, noting that the reason groups have worked is because they've worked primarily outside academic institutions. Groups have flourished outside institutions because they provide potential power for those traditionally powerless within institutions. Once the group moves inside the institution, they retain their potential power for change, but such change often runs exactly counter to institutional goals.

Freire points out that the "political character of our method is independent of our consciousness of it" (102). Our stance on group work is political whether or not we acknowledge conflicts, political whether we believe we're giving students access to pre-set educational goals or creating potential dissenters to institutional values. It's this political recognition that power relationships get fuzzy in the small group that help explain institutional distrust of group methods and collaboration in research and writing. It helps explain teachers' fears about loss of control, often masked by questions about loss of time. It helps explain students' own discomfort with work that will be difficult to count for any one person. Teachers and students fear the question of who sets the values once the group takes over, once they're fifteen voices raised rather than one. It's fairly typical among teachers I've observed who continue to opt for group work to assuage their own and their students' suspicion by implementing tight controls on the work the groups do. You set the content: *here's the topic for discussion.* You decide how much work will be done: *I want three questions.* You insist that each group report out and you make decisions about how effective the group has been in doing the work assigned to them. When group work is used as "peer editing," where students assess one another's writing, the controls are often even more stringent.

But I believe both aims, pulling against one another as they most certainly do, can work together once they're rethought and mediated in classroom approaches. Bruffee, Rose, David Bartholomae and others who note and in some ways applaud the double aim of group work, all move too quickly to the socializing institutional end of groups, implying in this move that academic discourse is a product, long ago completed, and that it's only students who operate in process. That's why students, and not the discourse, must change. Bartholomae even encourages teachers to "turn again to the requirements of academic writing, or any writing that moves a writer into a privileged and closed discourse" (88). When you're initiated, they might say to students, perhaps then you can criticize; it's only then that you know what you're criticizing. But because criticism as a group goal is left till later or suppressed within the normal discourse of the subject field, the conclusions of group work are often foregone. House rules are obeyed, and the teacher as willing or unwilling servant in the academic house sees that it happens.

Freire's work suggests that in order to achieve both aims of group work the second, criticizing, aim must precede and then accompany the first as students become literate. I could show how the double aim gets accomplished in this way by giving examples from Freire himself, but Freire has argued, usually to little avail, that it's wrong to take one cultural context and apply it to another, wrong to see Brazilian farmers emerging from a feudal economy analogous to ESL students in Boston. A culture circle needs to be made and remade, according to each political, social and individual reality. So rather than take the farmers and workers in Principe, let me take instead one of Rose's "culture circles" in *Lives on the Boundary*.

Rose's book tells the story of many groups of students who stand outside the nor-



mal discourse of fields they study, whose "socially justifying belief," as Rorty puts it, places them as outsiders. As with Bruffee, for Rose the group, and the reading and writing the group accomplishes, become avenues to enter the academic community. Rose compares his students' situations to the new arrival in a foreign land, who needs to learn cultural codes and signals to operate successfully within that culture.

But in these stories of outsider or marginal groups something else is going on, though Rose may not notice it. There's Willie, the Vietnam veteran who writes of his frustration with life in rude comments on the classics, there are the fourth graders who complete assigned narratives with jokes from TV sitcoms and from family tales. And there is the group of homebound students linked together by telephone in a program Rose taught called the Learning Line. When Rose asked students to send along examples of poems they liked, they took him at his word. And he was suddenly caught between the normal discourse of the academic environment he had learned and the abnormal discourse of the one his students valued. "These [poems] threw me," Rose says. "They were sentimental as could be. The rhymes were strained, and the diction archaic. They were poems all my schooling had trained me to dismiss." But he can't dismiss them; the group won't let him. Their enjoyment in sharing bad verse is so real, so much a part of their learning, that it can't be denied. "I realized," Rose says, "that they wanted to participate in some fuller way." The poems they provide become part of the conversation of the class, passed along together with Rose's own more traditionally acceptable ones. The Learning Line group in a way takes Rose into their conversation rather than the other way around. "Here," one woman who continues to write poems her own way says at one point, "here's a poem like one of the ones Mike sends us."

These people needed to get into the academic conversation, but they needed to do something more important first. They needed to name and recognize their alienation from it. *These are poems I like.* They needed to line that up against academic ways. *What makes the poems I like and the ones Mike likes different?* Only then could they participate in the academic way, renaming it, and using their own difference as a tool for renaming. "They found things to value in both kinds of poems, mine and theirs." I don't think they would have found value in Mike's poems had they not insisted on the inclusion of their own.

It's easy enough perhaps to see how alienation might be a tool for learning in a group such as the isolated homebound, or the exploited peasantry. It may be harder to see how students in a freshman composition class or in an advanced writing class or in a twelfth grade Advanced Placement English class would experience alienation of the kind Freire and Rose portray. But the truth is that school is cultural, promoting social and institutional values, and students are alienated by their lack of consciousness of the role they play in that culture. The first work of students in a small group is to understand their own place in that culture, their terms and beliefs, and then to juxtapose that difference to the social knowledge of the classroom, which would involve groups in studying the content and forms of such knowledge. Through reading and talking and writing, groups begin to come up with terms and ideas that merit exploration. The group then learns to remake knowledge, pulling together academic or institutional knowledge within the framework of their own. This is the method for individual learning that Vygotsky describes, and it's also the method groups use in order to achieve power. Its the method students need to learn to use to enter the academic house, a method to add rooms of their own, even tear parts down.

The teacher is the catalyst that helps students follow this process. But to be a cata-

lyst is to allow, or even encourage, change. As Mahala's critique of WAC argues, "To admit that whatever methods or boundaries we or others espouse for making knowledge are in fact inside the dialectic of knowledge-making is to open ourselves radically to dialogue and critique of the institution we inhabit" (785). The risk of dissent, and even the greater risk of having to question oneself, prevents many teachers from using group work effectively. It's like the movie *Risky Business*. In that movie Tom Cruise and friends engage in many risky activities, but the single most frightening one is that Tom's character Joel allows people into his upper middle class house who don't belong. They're strangers from the city, rowdies and gamblers, prostitutes and pimps. They are threatening precisely because they're outsiders, don't operate with the same codes. Joel spends a lot of time once things get out of control wondering what's lost or broken, wondering how much he has to accommodate himself to the group's insistent presence. Of course what happens is that he does have to accommodate, learns to want to: the movie ends with his exuberantly challenging his own codes in front of the symbolic defender of them—the admissions officer from Princeton.

As teachers, we have to take on the risky business of looking at the academic house we live in, and the ways we invite students into it. We have to be willing to look at how we ourselves entered it, how much we brought with us, how much we were forced to leave at the door. We have to make ourselves brave enough to risk the dissent that inevitably comes when democracy is in action. Once teachers do that, we'll see the work of the small groups in our classes become the real work in the class, with students negotiating their own ideas against and around the ideas they're offered. When students find a real voice, their own and not some mimicked institutional voice, both students and teachers acknowledge the possibility of the real change that might ensue. As they find that groups can transform and be transformed, teachers and students learn not only to risk that change but welcome it.

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GAIL E. HAWISHER AND CYNTHIA L. SELFE

# The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class

Since the mass production of the first fully-assembled microcomputer in 1977, technological change has influenced not only the ways in which we write but also, for many of us, the ways in which we teach writing.[1] Increasing numbers of writing instructors now depend on computer-supported classrooms and use on-line conferences that take place over computer networks as teaching environments. Writing instructors who hope to function effectively in these new electronic classrooms must assess ways in which the use of computer technology might shape, for better and worse, their strategies for working with students. Along with becoming acquainted with current composition theory, instructors, for example, must learn to recognize that the use of technology can exacerbate problems characteristic of American classrooms and must continue to seek ways of using technology that equitably support all students in writing classes. All too frequently, however, writing instructors incorporate computers into their classes without the necessary scrutiny and careful planning that the use of any technology requires.

Such scrutiny will become increasingly important with computers, given the considerable corporate and community investment accompanying this technology as its use expands within our educational system. Unfortunately, as writing instructors, we have not always recognized the natural tendency when using such machines, as cultural artifacts embodying society's values, to perpetuate those values currently dominant within our culture and our educational system. This tendency has become evident as we continue to integrate computers into our efforts at writing instruction. In many English composition classes, computer use simply reinforces those traditional notions of education that permeate our culture at its most basic level: teachers talk, students listen; teachers' contributions are privileged; students respond in predictable, teacher-pleasing ways.

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