Moving beyond "This is good" in Peer Response

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In any writing class that I teach—first-year writing, upper-level composition, creative writing workshops—I attempt to do what Wendy Bishop advocates in *Released into Language* (1990): I attempt to put writers into motion, to have the students in my class experience what "it feels like to be a writer, someone who generates, drafts, revises, shares, and publishes writing, someone who experiences blocks, anxiety, elation, and success" (40). I see the use of peer workshops in a writing class as a way to put student writers into motion, and, as a result, my students take their writing through several drafts and consistently share, respond, and provide feedback to one another's work in various configurations: pairs, small groups, and the class as a whole.

Similar to Karen Spear in *Sharing Writing* (1988) and Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff in *A Community of Writers* (2000), I consider the use of peer workshops an important component in the writing process. Like Spear, I see the sharing of work in peer groups as a way to prolong invention, to encourage students to see their drafts not as finished products but rather as steps in the composing process (5). The responses and reactions they receive from their peers enable them to work through the steps of revision.

Like Elbow and Belanoff (2000), I feel that peer workshops give students a wider sense of audience, by providing them with a variety of readers and a range of responses, that is an important aspect of their growth and development as writers (508). I also see that peer workshops enable students to participate in the decision-making process that underlies all steps of the writing

process. When students receive a variety of responses and reactions on a piece of writing, they need to make decisions about how to interpret, use, and reconcile all the feedback they receive.

Despite the benefits and the importance of using peer workshops in the classroom, however, they can be a struggle—a struggle to make productive and worthwhile for writers and responders alike. When it comes to peer responding, I have two objectives. First, I want the students to respond in a supportive and encouraging manner so that as writers they feel comfortable enough to take risks and chances in their work, to explore different forms, and to experiment with different rhetorical strategies. Writers grow and develop by expanding and pushing the boundaries of their writing, and they need a space that provides them the freedom to take risks and to fail. Second, I want peer responses to be effective in terms of revision by providing comments that do not correct but rather offer descriptive reactions to the text, questions that enable the writer to think about the piece in a new way, and options for revision.

Part of the struggle with peer workshops is that students come into the writing class having had limited experience with revision and feedback. Many students tend to consider their drafts as finished and have difficulty seeing revision as anything beyond editing for surface errors (Spear 24). Students also have limited experience as responders. They tend to see feedback as criticism or evaluation and their job as a responder as one of fixing and correcting the text (Spear 131). Students also tend to want to preserve the harmony in their group and in their class (Spear 25) and are hesitant to judge, feeling they do not have the authority to do so (Elbow and Belanoff 507). The intersection of all these factors results in student responses in peer workshops that alternate between two types. They either praise a draft they see as done—"I like it"; "This is good"—and circle typos and surface grammar errors, or they harshly criticize, tearing to shreds a draft they consider inadequate.

Spear, Elbow and Belanoff, and Bishop, as well as others, offer a variety of ways to establish and enact peer responding in the classroom. The particular exercise I describe here is meant to be used in conjunction with these and other methods of teaching peer response. It serves as a type of background exercise, one

that helps lay the groundwork for others by making visible to students the types of responses that encourage revision and those that do not. This exercise enables students to recognize the importance of being specific as well as the importance of focusing on the text rather than making judgments about the writer.

I have also found this exercise helpful in enabling students to work through texts of published writers. Students tend to read and respond to published texts and student texts differently. I have found that students tend to be less generous with published texts, quick to harshly criticize a published writer they do not understand or agree with. Their harsh criticism and attacks on the writer prevent them from moving forward into understanding the text. When this happens, I have found it helpful to refer back to this exercise, to remind students not only to separate the writer from the text, but also to respond to the published writer as they would to one of their peers. If I ask them to respond to the published writer in the same way they have been working through their peer groups—by separating the writer from the text, by describing what they see in the text, and by asking questions—they have a way into the text, a way to begin to understand what the writer is saying.

Description of Activity

I have used this exercise in all kinds of undergraduate writing courses, including lower- and upper-division composition and creative writing. I have also found this exercise useful in courses and workshops that prepare new teachers for the writing classroom. I do the following exercise early in the semester, before we begin any kind of peer workshopping. Generally, the exercise and the discussion it leads into take an entire class period. First I take the students through the following steps:

1. List three comments/responses you have ever received on a piece of writing.

2. List three comments/responses that if you ever received on a piece of writing you would be so discouraged you would never write

again. Be creative. These may or may not be comments you have ever actually received. Hopefully they are not.

3. List three comments/responses that if you ever received on a piece of writing you would be so encouraged you would keep writing forever. Again, be creative. And again, these may or may not be comments you have actually received. Hopefully they are.

4. Look over all the comments/responses on your list and rank them in terms of their effectiveness for revision—1 being the most effective for revision, 9 being the least.

Each of these steps raises different issues concerning the kinds of responses that can be given on a piece of writing. As a way to prompt a discussion on these issues, as a class we begin looking at the comments/responses the students have listed in each step of the exercise. Beginning with the first step, I ask each student to read one comment from his or her list out loud. I then ask if they see any similarities among the comments and if they can make any specific generalizations about them; this leads into a discussion about the issues that emerge.

As we move through and discuss each step of the exercise, the following issues generally surface.

Responses/Comments Received on a Piece of Writing. The issues raised here generally have to do with what instructors' comments mean. Students usually list responses they have received in the past but are never quite sure what they mean exactly. Many students list things such as "awk." and "trans." and confess they have never known what these abbreviations stand for. We also discuss that although they may know what the teacher means by these kinds of comments, they are generally at a loss as to how to "fix" and/or "correct" the problem. As many students point out, if they had known the sentence was awkward sounding, they would not have written it that way. Students also list comments such as "nice" or "good" and discuss how they are never quite sure how to read these comments. As the discussion progresses, the students begin to see the need to be specific in their own comments and responses. If, for example, a sentence is "awk," it is helpful to the writer to suggest how to rewrite the sentence.

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Students also begin to see that one-word comments in the margin give writers very little information about the effectiveness of their piece.

Responses/Comments That Discourage. As we go around the room reading these comments out loud, students quickly see that comments such as "This looks like it was written by a first grader" and "My dog can write better than you" focus on and attack the writer and say little about the writing itself. Students also see that these comments are hurtful and highlight what is wrong with the writer rather than discussing what is going on in the text. This leads to a discussion on the importance of separating the writer from the text and staying focused on the piece itself. The students also begin to see that these comments are meant to be hurtful rather than encourage any type of revision.

Responses/Comments That Encourage. Although these comments tend to be full of praise (e.g., "You are a talented writer") and encouraging (e.g., "This should be published"), students quickly see that these comments also focus on the writer rather than on the writing. Students begin to understand that these are dead-end comments, comments that do not help or enable revision. The students acknowledge that they like to hear these kinds of comments and that there are points during the drafting process when they need to be encouraged in order to continue to write. They also acknowledge, however, that these types of responses do not provide them with any information or a sense of direction to help them revise their piece. This generally leads us into a discussion of the last step of the exercise.

Ranking in Terms of Effectiveness for Revision. In terms of effectiveness for revision, students rank responses such as "This is good" and "I like it" and "This stinks" near the bottom of their list. Students acknowledge that they want to be encouraged to keep writing, but they also need direction and guidance to help them revise. Generally, the discussion focuses on the value of descriptive and specific responses. Responses that describe what is happening in a piece, that raise questions about the issues or

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points in the piece, that explain how something is or is not working, and that suggest ways the piece could be developed are all effective comments because they give writers information about their writing.

Although the focus of this exercise is on the students in the role of responders, it is during this section of the exercise that the discussion begins to shift to how students use and interpret the feedback they receive. As we work our way through each step of the exercise, they begin to realize which kinds of responses they can discard and which kinds of comments they want to consider. Students realize, for example, that comments that do not deal with their writing can be discarded. They also realize there may be times when they need to ask their responder for more information. Students begin to see that if a responder tells them he or she likes something in the essay, it is helpful to know why the responder liked it. By recognizing the type of responses they need in order to revise their texts, students will enter their peer groups ready to take responsibility for their own feedback.

Some Reflections

I have found this exercise to be successful regardless of the specific teaching context. The issues that emerge always lead into a productive discussion on responding and the various ways in which feedback can be used. When student resistance occurs, it is usually at the second step, "Responses/Comments That Discourage." I have had students claim that *nothing* could ever prevent them from writing. As one student told me, "You would have to chop off my arms to keep me from writing!" These types of responses usually occur with two sorts of students: honors students and creative writing students who strongly identify themselves as writers. Their resistance can be traced to two factors: confidence and a sense of audience. Honors students and self-identified creative writers come into the writing classroom with a high level of confidence in their abilities. Generally, they are students who have in the past been recognized and rewarded as

"good" writers. They already have a strong sense of their abilities and feel it would take more than one harsh comment to silence them from writing.

Although both groups of students have high confidence levels, their sense of audience differs and leads to two very different and interesting discussions. The creative writing students who strongly identify themselves as writers do not see themselves as writing for an audience. They tend to subscribe to a more romantic notion of writing and writers. They believe that all their writing comes from within, from some deep-down burning desire to express something. They see writing as something they *must do*, with little regard for audience. They write for them-selves, and if they are misunderstood by their audience, they see that as a sign of genius. As one student told me when I explained that neither I nor anyone in his group could understand his essay, "No one understood James Joyce either." With the creative writers, this activity leads to a discussion about the importance of audience, centering on the following questions: Can you ever write with a completely free from audience, particularly if you want to be published?

Whereas the creative writers strongly identify as writers and are completely invested in their words, the honors students tend toward the opposite reaction. Although they do not identify themselves as writers, they have a strong sense of writing for their audience—the teacher. Past experiences in the classroom have taught them that a successful piece of writing does what the teacher (audience) wants. They feel they could never be silenced or prevented from writing because they would just do what the audience demanded. This leads into an interesting discussion on how we identify audiences and what strategies we use to identify what audiences want to hear. This also, however, leads into a discussion concerning how to use feedback and how to be personally invested in our own writing.

When I have used this activity in teacher preparation courses, the results are different still. Although new teachers offer little resistance to the idea that comments can discourage writers, their discussion tends to focus on the ways *they* have been silenced

and/or blocked from writing in the past. Teachers tend to list comments they have received, comments they were troubled by and/or that prevented them from writing. The discussion tends to focus on how they dealt with these comments, understood them, and worked through them in order to continue writing. This type of discussion often highlights new strategies we can offer our students to help them work through their own periods of being blocked.

Conclusion

Teachers generally accept the idea that responding to writing is something we need to teach our students. Responding to texts is not only a skill students need to develop but also an ongoing process in their development as writers. This exercise is one of the beginning steps in that process. I have found it useful to continually refer to this exercise throughout the semester as we work through other activities related to peer workshopping and as a way to remind students how we want to respond to texts. Since students tend to have limited experience as responders, they usually see themselves on the receiving end of responding. During the exercise, I find I must continually reinforce the new role of responder they will be assuming and make the connections for them between the issues we are discussing in class and their new role. This also provides opportunities to model responses I think are effective for revision.

For teachers, this exercise is useful for our own development as responders to writing. It enables us to check the effectiveness of our own comments and responses with the people who are reading and using our comments to revise their work. Periodically, some of my own responses and comments come back to haunt me as they surface in the class discussion and students rank them low on their list of effectiveness and/or discuss how they do not understand what they mean. In one class session, for example, a student included "This is fine" on his list of comments received. He began discussing how he was never sure how to read this comment. To him, *fine* was a word someone used when they could not think of anything better to say. Someone

else in the class thought that the comment "This is fine" was a response a teacher gave when she did not really like the piece and that it was a nice way of saying, "This essay is really not very good." During this discussion, I began to realize this was a comment I had used frequently on papers and that although to me the comment "This is fine" was a way to begin responding and literally meant, "This is fine" or "This is good," the students were not reading it that way. I realized that since this was generally the first sentence of my response, the writers were reading the rest of my comments thinking their essays on the whole were not very good. As a result of this discussion, I stopped using "This is fine" as a way to begin my response.

As teachers we sometimes fall into a routine of responding, using the same stock phrases and saying the same kinds of things to every text. This exercise serves to make our routine visible to us and, through the class discussion, enables us to find alternative ways of responding. If done early in the semester, this exercise also enables us to gear our responses to the particular class we are teaching.

Works Cited

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