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How Social Relationships Affect Writers

by Karen A. Keller

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The Question

My students always enjoyed working in groups. They begged to be with their friends whenever I assigned a group project. In general, I dreaded allowing students to work in groups. I feared the classroom disruption from students who could not stay on task. And I wondered if students would do their best work in a group. Yet, I had to admit that as a graduate student, I found that some of my best work resulted from work in a group setting.

As a graduate student of Dr. Antonio Tendero at Grand Valley State University, I worked extensively in a group setting with both the Lake Michigan Writing Project and his Advanced Writing class. Whenever I left class, I felt inspired by the lively conversations about writing generated from the members of my group. I looked forward to the responses and feedback about my work and began to notice that my writing demonstrated deeper development. Instead of dreading revision, I found it essential because I recognized that my writing group would provide valuable feedback on each of my revisions through both conversation and peer editing. Soon, I noted that we students not only talked about writing in the classroom, we conversed about writing in the computer lab, in libraries and restaurants, and even in GVSU's courtyards and parking lots.

I also found that during breaks from writing, we consulted each other for advice on just about anything: movies, books, politics, concerts, vacations, and even our own families. The social ties within our group grew stronger as the strength of my writing increased. In fact, all of my writing skills continued to improve as my friendship with my group flourished.

I finally understood why my students begged to work in groups. Talking and working in groups made perfect sense. The social aspect proved to be thoroughly enjoyable. Talking and interacting is fun. However, the real surprise was that the quality of my writing expanded. Could the social aspect of a group, the conversation, have been an important part of my improvement?

As a teacher, I observed students talking to each other all the time. "Hey, did you go to the movies last weekend? What do you think of my new CD? Yes, my mom made me get this haircut. I can go to the game because I just got ungrounded!" Just about everything about their school life involved talking to fellow students. They searched out each other's opinions and

grasped each other's advice. And they looked to each other for approval on just about everything that affected their lives. If students acquired advice and approval on non-academic things, perhaps this aspect of their social lives could transfer to the classroom setting. Could these interactions be utilized in a classroom-writing group to improve writing? Could high school students transfer some of their enthusiasm for talking with each other to talking about writing? I decided to investigate how social relationships affect high school writers.

Gathering Data

I chose my 9th Grade Composition / Literature Honors class for my research because it was a small, manageable class with only 18 students, 5 males and 13 females. They liked each other and related well. I reasoned that utilizing their social skills to improve writing might be possible. One goal was to get the students talking about writing with the same level of interest as they had when talking about their social lives. To do this, I wanted a classroom that would appeal to my students. The environment needed to be student-friendly, so students could get close to one another and "wrestle with ideas, talk with each other, and discuss what they found out" (Daniels and Bizar 90).

Therefore, I created a classroom environment that lent itself to students forming groups easily. On the first day of school in August, 2003, students self-selected their seats within an arrangement of desks in neighborhood groups of 3 that formed a half-moon inside the classroom. This arrangement allowed writing groups to form easily and conversations to begin quickly because of the time saved from little movement of desks. Neighborhood groups of 3 made it easy to have conversations about writing because each student had 2 other students with whom to talk and debrief (Daniels and Bizar 62).

The class met from August, 2003 to June, 2004, which afforded me quality and quantity of time to observe and to collect data. I kept a daily typed log of each assignment with my observations of the students working the assignments and their conversations about writing. In addition to my collection and assessment of student writing assignments, students "analyzed and evaluated the writing assignments" ("Comprehension: Bloom's Taxonomy"). As a strategy to gather student feedback relative to the assignments, I employed inquiry. I asked probing questions such as "what challenges did you encounter with this assignment?" that instigated students to "reflect on and talk about what they were doing before answering open-ended questions" ("Constructivism" 2). I recorded their responses to each question. Inquiry, as a method to facilitate data collection, nudged the students to "talk with me about what they learned and the relevancy of it" ("Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning" 2).

I collected data from a range of assignments designed to challenge students and to incline them to use higher level thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis ("Comprehension: Bloom's Taxonomy"). Additionally, I wanted students to incorporate "vivid verbs" into their writing, to effectively utilize subordinating conjunctions, and to include functional transitions. Sentence length, and a mix of types instead of just simple sentences, landed high on my priority list of improvements. Immediately, I decided to challenge my students through assignments that required the reading and studying of classic literature. I reasoned that the exposure of students to excellent writing in the form of classic literature would assist them in understanding that my

expectations for their writing were indeed elevated. Therefore, I chose American and British literature.

Furthermore, the variety of the very different writing styles that Mark Twain, O'Henry, and William Shakespeare presented added complexity. The individual writing assignments provided the challenge and creativity that I required. The utilization of higher level thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis were needed for the assignments: to compose a tall tale in the flavor of Mark Twain, to rewrite, to script, to update, and to perform a story with the kind of surprise of O'Henry, and to write analytically though probing, interpreting, and scrutinizing pieces of a tragedy by William Shakespeare. Prior to each writing assignment, I taught a mini-lesson. I briefly "demonstrated one ingredient that students would focus on for the assignment" (Daniels and Bizar 133). Focusing on a skill before starting to write helped the students to recognize what I expected in their writing.

Some Assignments

After reading Mark Twain's, "An Invalid's Story," I challenged my students to write a "tall tale" of their own. Prior to writing, I taught a lesson on "vivid verbs." The lesson included sample "simple verbs" and required a minimum of five "vivid verbs" as replacements. Students literally shouted out their "vivid verbs" with enthusiasm to replace the verb in sentences like this one: My lazy Uncle Gomer (takes advantage)_____ of/from/off nearly everyone in the family. "He mooched. He ripped off. He benefited. He profited. He resided." That mini-lesson caused my students to talk about word choice and to laugh too. They displayed their eagerness for the assignment with their smiles that lingered from the "vivid verb" mini-lesson. Of course, I wanted my students to create writing that was grammatically correct. But more importantly, I wanted them "to take a chance and try something that they had never tried before by creating something new and distinctly original" (Fletcher 16-17). This assignment additionally permitted students to "create powerful images of their own to boldly extend their thinking" (Fletcher 145). They used plenty of "exaggeration" for this assignment.

Students self-selected groups for this assignment, and I noted that most groups were all male or all female. When I protested and suggested gender bias, my students argued that I *said* they could choose their own groups; they were comfortable with each other, and they begged me not to make them change. I stopped and really listened to them. I reasoned that I did require males and females to work together in literature discussion groups, and they worked together quite well in that structure. Thus, I decided that throughout my research I would permit the writing groups to be completely self-selected with no interference by me. I rationalized that if students chose their own groups and were happy, perhaps the writing experience could be a more positive one. I also believed it important for students to have "choice in the classroom, make meaningful decisions, and live with the consequences that choice entails" (Daniels and Bizar 8).

Student Feedback

Interestingly, the students who labored on these tall tales did not want to read them to the class. They wanted *me* to read the tall tales to them. I reluctantly agreed. Since I read orally to them often, I reasoned that they wanted to repeat a comfort-structured experience. The students

responded to my reading of the tall tales as active listeners and heartily applauded the titles of each tale. Titles like "Knight by Night," "The Talented Stalker," "Around the World in an Hour," "The Night the Pigs Grew Wings," and "Mac the Magical Cheese Man Goes to the Moon" evoked thunderous laughter. The smiles on their faces were absolutely priceless. Students related that they loved hearing their own words read to the class by their teacher.

My Observation

I was on to something. The students were wildly engaged in this assignment. This in-class writing assignment allowed me to coach my students. If students took this assignment home, I would not have been able to help them. I circulated among the groups, and frequently sat down with them to join in the conversation. One student asked me if we were learning anything because we were noisy and having so much fun. That comment from Michael struck something in me. I took the time to explain that synthesizing is higher level thinking-creating something new-a tall tale based on a short story ("Comprehension: Bloom's Taxonomy"). I also informed that work that is both collaborative and cooperative is an excellent method of learning (Daniels and Bizar 3). I took the opportunity to have a conversation with my students in which I became "the facilitator who translated information to help them to construct understanding" (Bruner 1). The students chose their own groups; they collaborated creatively, and they shared the experience of hearing their own tall tales read by the teacher. I read their tall tales with the same enthusiasm as I read a Mark Twain story. Their smiles and compliments to each other along with comments like "Listen, that's the part that I wrote," and "Good job. Good job," demonstrated to me that the writing group cared about the work of the individual writer. The compliment related just that. Additionally, writers talked to each other. There was quite a bit of talking that did not pertain to the assignment. However, I recalled that whenever I worked in a writing group, the initial conversation tended to be personal: "How are you? I stayed up late working on homework. I think I might get a different car." Personal talk appeared at the beginning of each meeting of my writing group. It was nearly always brief. From my own experience, I remembered that personal talk caused me to care about the people in my group. Still, I needed to limit personal talk so that students could work more productively on each assignment.

Another Assignment

After reading O'Henry's short story, "The Gift of the Magi," I assigned student-writing groups a rewrite of the story that required replacing the 2 main characters with 2 wealthy young executives and the addition of a foil. The assignment requirement included expressive character development, a complete storyline with dialogue, and the creation of a typed script. I wanted the dialogue because I believe that dialogue is a very important type of writing and a necessary skill to learn. Dialogue provides "information, characterizes, adds tension, creates rhythm, and injects a "voice" into writing" (Romano 56). Additionally, my students' use of dialogue affords them the opportunity to practice skills of "narration, description, argument, and persuasion" (Romano 57). This assignment also offered students the opportunity to practice their presentation skills through "performance" in front of an audience of their peers. For the performance piece, the student writing group presented their skits using props and a wardrobe created by the group. My mini-lesson on the use of quotations marks followed an instruction and review of characterization. I used the overhead projector while working with the whole class to create a characterization of

both Della and Jim from O'Henry's story.

Before I placed students into their writing groups, I discussed group productivity. I passed out a group work rubric that expressed my expectations of the individual student working in a group. The rubric explained exactly what a student needed to do to earn the maximum points (5) allowed for their productivity while working in the writing group. For example, a student needed to be on task, stay focused, and encourage other members of the writing group. At the end of the allotted time for writing group work, I planned to call the roll, and each student needed to self-evaluate their productivity.

Student Feedback

Lots of animated talking articulated the energy of the groups. I needed to channel their talking into feedback about the writing experience to provide me with important information about their learning. I decided that after the writing groups finished work on each assignment, a debriefing/reflective time was needed in which the students and teacher talk about what they learned, and how their group work helped or did not help them to gain understanding (Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning 2). To record data and document their feedback, I typed the questions and gave the handouts to the students to record their responses. Before I collected their responses, a whole class discussion occurred with students reflecting on their experience from working with their group. Since these students had never worked in writing groups, the following question helped me to assess if students felt satisfied working with a writing group.

Question - What do you like about working on the assignment with a writing group?

- "Our group is very organized when it comes to shouting out ideas." (Autumn)
- "Together we combine ideas to make an awesome script." (Rachelle)
- "I like self-selected writing groups because it's easier to get your work done because you aren't afraid to speak up and you mostly think alike." (Emily)
- "I like being able to make decisions together and compromising. Also, I get many different points of view, not just mine." (Jeff)
- "I like sharing ideas, alike or different, and creating an imaginative fun-filled story." (Kendall)
- "It's fun to juggle ideas, debate about what to write, and then putting the ideas together." (Jaylin)
- "I like how the different characteristics that each person brings to the group shows up in the piece of writing. Even though there may be confusion, I like how we organize everything in the end." (Paulina)
- "The group adds ideas that I would not normally come up with to problematic things like who is going to be our foil? The answer was given by proposing a doughnut man." (Chris)

My Observation

I noted that the collaboration intrigued me. Conflict arose when one small group could not agree on names for their characters. I watched intently as one student did not allow her group to manipulate her. Then agreement came and the group began to write the script. They logged into a computer and all three of them worked collaboratively on the script. The enthusiasm for writing was contagious. I felt happy watching them have so much fun, but more importantly, I observed

students who practiced "exchanging ideas and negotiating with others and evaluating their contributions" ("Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning" 2). I noted that I never noticed this kind of excitement when my students did independent writing. Why is the collaborative creative approach such a happy assignment? These students knew that I would assess their work and use a rubric, yet they acted thrilled to be writing. There was something about collaboration and writing creatively that seemed to be making a difference. They were not writing alone. I witnessed that students appeared more likely to take a risk if they were not taking it alone.

When I took the roll for productivity, some of the scores were lower than I expected. Some students tried to give themselves a "5," but their group members countered, "You have to admit that you goofed off and talked to another group. Give yourself a "3." I liked this part. This practice proved to be a "solid procedure for keeping groups productive" (Daniels and Bizar 60). The students within the group held each other responsible. One off-task group attempted to give themselves all "5's" until I stopped, peered over my glasses, and gave them "the teacher look." Without my saying a word, the students quickly lowered their scores. I discovered that I liked students self-assessing themselves. Grading themselves caused them to pause and truly think about their performance. Most students worked productively, and I believe that the self-assessment grade for productivity played an important part. Instead of only me giving a grade, "assessment became a part of the learning process with students playing a larger role in judging their own progress and productivity" ("Constructivism 2"). I expected that the next roll for productivity would result in higher scores.

When students turned in their group work for a grade, I noticed that the writing was more complex than what I normally see in individual writing assignments. Stephanie, Autumn and Jaylin's script had stage directions and commentary such as "Ella enters (dazed and distracted) and exits in the opposite direction" and "indistinct chattering continues as the two executives enter the building." Could the group writing experience stimulate the use of better vocabulary?

[Another Assignment - Part 1](#)

Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" is exceptionally challenging reading for 9th graders because of the language. It is part of the required curriculum where I teach. Most of my students struggle with both the reading and the interpretive and analytical writing assignments that go with it. With that in mind, I chose to have students work in writing groups for all interpreting and analyzing of the play. I assigned two separate quotations for analysis and interpretation from Act I of Shakespeare's play. Writing groups needed to work together over two class periods to identify the act and scene number and line numbers. Additionally, recognition of the speakers as well as the person/persons spoken to needed to be documented. Finally, an interpretation presented in paragraph format completed the assignment.

Quotation #1 - William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," Act I, scene i.

And hear the sentence of your moved prince.
Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word
By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,

Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets
And made Verona's ancient citizens
Cast by their grave beseeming ornaments
To wield old partisans, in hands as old,
Cank'ed with peace, to part your cank'ed hate.
If ever you disturb our streets again,
Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace (292).

I modeled how to complete the assignment by using a sample quotation from "Romeo and Juliet." My mini-lesson included how to look up words in the dictionary to assist in analysis, as well as how to write in the present tense when writing about literature. I supplied dictionaries to all the writing groups. Then I pulled back and observed.

Student Feedback

I wanted to address conflict within the writing group because I recognized that unresolved conflict may hinder learning. Challenging situations often produce conflict, and Shakespeare is certainly challenging material. Therefore, I believed it both important and necessary for students to assess conflict within the writing group through an examination that "emphasized hands-on problem solving" ("Constructivism" 2). Encouraging students to "constantly assess how the activity is working helps students to gain understanding and develop ever-broadening tools to keep learning" ("Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning"). I used the following questions to help my students to assess conflict in the writing group.

Question #1 - *What conflicts arose in your group when working on analyzing a quote from Shakespeare ?*

- "We each had our own ideas and wanted our own ideas used." (Allie)
- "At first, we didn't know how to divide work." (Emily)
- "Our group had a lack of Shakespearean knowledge and had trouble connecting themes." (Kendall)
- "We had problems agreeing on the meaning and we each interpreted things differently. Everyone wanted the dictionary at the same time." (Jeff)
- "After some motivation, people began working and then the assignment conflict level was held at a minimum." (Chris)
- "Our dictionary was damaged, so we were delayed." (Katherine)

Question #2 - *How did you deal effectively with these conflicts?*

- "We talked until we had a consensus." (Jaylin) "We just took it "word by word." (Matt)
- "We all put our ideas into one summarizing sentence, and got the work done by putting our ideas together and listening to others." (Allie)
- "We persuaded one person to let go of the dictionary once he had done his part. We compromised on interpretations and found an agreement." (Jeff)
- "We made the answers fit the writing best." (Abby)

My Observation

I circulated among the groups and noted comments such as "They talk funny," from one group. My students struggled while looking up words in the dictionary. One group's dictionary was damaged with the pages torn out from the exact section needed for decoding their word. I quickly replaced it. One group started looking up the word "monkey" and exhibited what sounded like nervous laughter. I sat with them and started a conversation about what was happening. They shared that they were struggling and not goofing around on purpose. I took the opportunity to help them with some definitions and modeled finding the definition to fit the word. I moved on. Another group, Chris, Michael and Jeff were having a lively discussion, "Yes, but the way I see it," Chris shared, "I want to look for really profound meaning." His group commented, "You are really smart." They called me over and shared their quest for deeper meaning. I became part of their conversation and supported their interpretation.

I expected disagreement because of the level of challenge in the material. I had to remind myself to permit the students to solve the conflict, and not jump in too soon.

- "We compromised and figured out who was doing what in the group." (Marissa)
- "We considered all points of view and writing the answers using all of our ideas." (David) "One student "hogged" the dictionary, so we decided to give the dictionary to me." (Michael) "We discussed what to do until we solved our problems. We all gave ideas on how we should divide the work." (Emily)

Although it was hard for me to step back, the results were worth it because my students' first attempt at this challenging work allowed them to look to each other for support; they used their social skills to resolve conflicts, and they pooled their collective knowledge. In addition, their paragraphs included a variety of sentence length and types. The lowest grade was a B-. I do not think that a B- is too bad for such a difficult first time assignment. I realized, however, that one dictionary per writing group did not work. I resolved to assign one dictionary per student for the next quotation assignment. When I called the roll for productivity, the scores were mostly "5's."

Another Assignment-Part 2

For the second part of the assignment, another quotation from "Romeo and Juliet," I prefaced the work by sharing my observations of the writing groups. I explained to them that my stepping back was purposeful and intentional. I wanted students to build from what they already knew with me intervening only if necessary. In effect, I "adjusted my level of help in response to my students' level of performance" ("Vygotsky and Social Cognition" 2). In turn, they shared with me that Shakespeare was difficult to interpret even with the help of a dictionary. Each group presented their analysis and interpretation to the class. I especially wanted students to share their work before beginning the next assignment, so that my students could learn from all the other groups. We talked about methods that worked such as division of the work and resolving conflicts. My mini-lesson consisted of a role-play on how I might resolve conflict when I work in a group taken from my own experience as a graduate student in a writing group. I believe in the importance of "sharing some of the resonant issues in my own life to help my students to understand that I am a student too" (Fletcher 26). Afterwards, I made time to teach another mini-

lesson on how to weave transitions into their interpretive sentences. Then I passed out dictionaries and added a thesaurus as well.

Quotation #2 - William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," Act I, scene i.

Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs;
Being purges, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;
Being vexed, a sea nourished with loving tears.
What is it else? A madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet (294).

Student Feedback

Students engaged in much more dialogue for the second assignment. Their talk appeared more focused for the 2nd part of the Shakespeare assignment. I wanted to know if the students used any special method of motivation within the writing groups. Another important consideration for feedback included whether students felt that their own writing was affected by the writing group. Finally, I knew that the assignment was challenging. However, the idea that perhaps the writing group itself challenged the student writer might be an added benefit from working within a writing group. I therefore presented 3 questions to students for consideration after they completed part 2 of the Shakespeare quotation assignment.

Question #1 - List and explain 2 methods of motivation that you use in your writing group?

- "We used good communication and respecting everyone in our group." (Stephanie)
- "Encourage others to explain their interpretation. By doing so, you can see their opinions and respect them. We also calmly discussed disagreements to see all opinions." (Jaylin)
- "I wanted to get a good grade and work with my friends." (Sara)
- "One thing that motivates is that we have to get it done. There is no sense in wasting time by fighting; we needed to combine our ideas and work together as a team." (Allie)
- "We kept in mind that the work had to be accomplished on time, and we assigned jobs as writer, dictionary person to make sure that everyone is taking part." (Kendall)
- "Our group had the motivation of using other's ideas to expand our own." (Katherine)
- "Constructive criticism motivated our group to do better. We only got an 80% on our last assignment and we wanted to get a 100% on this one." (David)

Question #2 - List and explain 2 ways that your own writing is affected from working with your group.

- "My writing is more thorough and complete because after I think something, questions were asked, making my thoughts more complete." (Emily)
- "My own writing has evolved from working with my group because I learned to look at all things, even small details. My wording sounds smooth, and I have been able to increase my vocabulary." (Stephanie)
- "My own writing will flourish from hearing others' ideas and opinions and it expands my open-mindedness." (Autumn)

- "It gives me word choices, a larger vocabulary. I think about things differently to see a new point of view." (David)
- "A slew of different words that I didn't use normally appear when I work with a group. I am more specific and get my point across clearly." (Chris)

Question #3 - Explain how your writing group challenges you as a writer?

- "They make me examine my methods of writing. Sometimes I think too hard and overdo some things. I need them to be mellow. I need to be more concise, and they showed me that I could write less as long as I get the information correct. They show me my weaknesses and what I need to work on." (Jeff)
- "They challenge me to write to my full potential and use everything that I have been taught. I use skills and vocabulary that I have learned and apply it to my writing." (Paulina)
- "They make me listen to all points of view and to condense them into one. This is a challenge because I am usually narrow-minded; however, I cannot be that way in a group, so group writing helps me." (Stephanie)
- "When I write in a group my thoughts hold more detail because the members ask questions on my ideas. My vocabulary with them is more higher learning too. Working with them motivates my writing, pushing it to be better." (Emily)
- "They challenge me to use my comprehending skills to understand the task. They also showed me how to compromise." (Rachelle)

My Observation

I observed much more dialogue among my students. Expressions of a desire to get a better grade abounded. I looked at that as a positive. Students wanted better grades, so they looked at methods to achieve that, such as assigning jobs to assure that all members of the groups realized higher productivity. They engaged in conversation on how to attain a higher grade, and students also constructively criticized their own work. Moreover, students pooled their content knowledge as they continued in the conversation. Especially important, I think, is that the conversation stimulated students to think about word choice and many considered vocabulary and the expression of it in their work.

As I observed, I entered the conversation too. I did not know the meaning of "5 dollar words." My students explained that "5 dollar words" are words that need to be looked up in a dictionary. Allie explained that she felt inspired by her group to do her best and use better vocabulary. I felt inspired by the conversation. The conversation within the group motivated students to write better. Most student related that their groups challenged them on more than one level: examination of methods of writing, consideration of skills and vocabulary, and fair distribution of the workload in a group.

As I engaged in conversations with each group, I noted that less silly conversation took place, replaced by more academic conversation. Productivity remained high within the writing group. Their conversations reminded me of my own conversations within my writing group at GVSU because my students expressed methods of motivation to each other that were similar to the motivational techniques employed in my Lake Michigan Writing Project group. And grading

their papers demonstrated better vocabulary, a nice mix of sentence types and good use of transitions.

A Most Challenging Final Assignment

My students learned well and worked quite well within writing groups. However, I needed to assess them as independent learners. For the next assignment, students could not work with their writing groups. I assigned another challenging Shakespeare assignment, Sonnet 116. Students needed to analyze the sonnet, and write their analysis in paragraph format. My lesson and handout included an explanation of the thematic structure and rhyme scheme of a sonnet, as well as how to identify the problem presented in the first two quatrains and how the couplet attempts to solve the problem.

William Shakespeare Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh no! It is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come.
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved (1750).

Student Feedback

The questions that I wanted answered the most pressed heavily on my mind. Could the independent student face the challenge of the final assignment and meet it with success? Could the students produce satisfactory results when working independently and employ the same skills as they did when working as a group? And most importantly, what did students believe that they learned from each other that could be applied for future assignments? This independent assignment presented an interesting challenge to students.

I hoped to find that students transferred what they learned from their writing groups to their independent work. I presented students with three questions to answer after completing the assignment on Shakespeare's Sonnet 116.

Question #1 - What challenges did you encounter with this assignment? How did you meet those challenges?

- "I didn't know some of the words. I first found a dictionary at my house and looked up words that I didn't know. I also used some creativity to figure out what the writer meant with the language he used. I also asked my mom her opinion so that I could see a different point of view." (Katherine)
- "I had trouble remembering to look at it by quatrain. It was tough pinpointing what Shakespeare meant. I used a dictionary to look up words. For switching to explaining by quatrains, I just had to focus more. And remind myself to understand some parts, I talked it over with my dad. I formed my opinion of what things meant, and then I listened to his opinion to get a different point of view." (Jeff)
- "I did not understand some words and phrases, but I easily met the challenge with a dictionary." (Michael)
- "The challenges were how to put my thoughts into words. In writing groups, we brainstormed different ideas and compromised what would fit best. I met these challenges by confronting people to help to get the right ideas on paper." (Marissa)
- "I didn't understand some of the words. To conquer this challenge, I used various dictionaries to decipher the meanings of the unknown words." (Rachelle)
- "I did not like this assignment at all. It was confusing to me and was not fun to me. I talked on the phone with Emily and we worked on it. We helped each other." (Allie)

Question #2 - What skills did you use for this assignment that you have used in your writing group? List all skills.

- "I used the skills of reference and using "five dollar" words. I attempted to translate the sonnet literally, but was stopped when I reached the words with abstract concepts." (Chris)
- "My thinking skills, brainstorming, and being able to put two and two together, using a dictionary and phoning a friend." (Allie)
- "I used a dictionary to determine the meaning of uncomprehensible words. I looked up the sonnet sentence by sentence to better understand the writing. I learned that from my writing group." (Paulina)
- "I asked my mom to tell me whether what I thought sounded right to her and used her opinion. I also had to use a dictionary. I had to find real meaning instead of analyzing it literally. I also talked on the phone with Kelly." (Abby)
- "I did use a few skills (prior knowledge), thanks to Mrs. Keller's reminding, and that directly was important." (Matt)

Question #3 - What have you learned from your writing group that could be of help when given an assignment such as Shakespeare's Sonnet 116? Explain fully.

- "I learned from my writing group that two or more heads are better than one. I think that was one of the reasons why doing this assignment was more challenging than others." (Sara)
- "Working with a group gives you a feel for other ways of thinking. They help you look at writing from different angles, which you can apply when working by yourself." (Abby)
- "I have learned to keep an open mind and try to "solve" assignments without giving up." (Kelly)
- "I learned to use conflict directed at me to help my writing get better. Also, the skills of another student deciphering helped me." (Michael)
- "I learned to use "five dollar words," do things in an organized manner, and use a variety of sentences, punctuation, and vocabulary." (Kendall)

- "My writing group has challenged me to use better words. As a result, when I was working by myself, I used a computer thesaurus to find better words." (Rachelle)
- "A step-by-step process of figuring things out and applying them works, so why change it?" (Matt)

My Observation

My students found this assignment to be challenging, and they met the challenge with success. Using the dictionary proved invaluable, most reported. When students worked in groups with previous assignments, they conversed about the material and helped each other with comprehension. And when working independently, students transferred the activity of talking to their current assignment. However, the conversation expanded to include not just fellow students, but parents as well. How exciting to find students having meaningful conversations about literature with their parents! Some students felt shy about reporting that they phoned friends for help with comprehension, but I related to them that in the real world, most people ask for help when faced with challenging material. Knowing how to find help is a skill, I informed, and a valuable one at that.

Use of good vocabulary improved with this assignment. Reading closely for understanding improved, as did critical thinking. Students looked at the material from all possible angles, and they used all possible resources to come to a conclusion. Their writing presented a variety of sentence types and lengths, and importantly, students used transition words. Vivid verb use became the norm with students conversing freely about the use of "5 dollar words." The conversation generated by students to aid in understanding of the assignment flowed into their writing about Shakespeare's sonnet. Their grades reflected it. I saw improvement in individual grades that matched previous grades from writing group work.

Conclusions

My research has caused me to pause and reflect how I use group work in my classroom. My initial concern regarding classroom disruption from students quickly dispelled itself when I made students aware of my expectations and introduced a writing group productivity rubric. Yes, a writing group setting is noisy, but it is expected to be noisy, with conversations about writing energizing the members of the group. Becoming a part of the conversation with my students, and not just the teacher, helped me to understand my students relative to their writing. Contributing to their conversation about writing and sharing my own thoughts about my own writing group allowed for conversation that my students related to. The writing group setting became a "most requested" activity in my classroom. Students wanted to share their writing as well as demonstrate skills that they reinforced within the writing group setting. Their social skills lent themselves to the conversation about writing. Writing scores improved. Although my students writing was grammatically correct, for the most part, before I began using writing groups, it lacked depth, with simple sentence structure and lackluster verb use. The writing group conversation about sentence type and transition use transferred to their independent writing. The improvement in writing exceeded my expectations.

Some questions still remain. Writing group assignments require more time than independent assignments. Writing group work needs to be completed in the classroom while independent assignments can be completed outside of school. The time factor does cause me some concern. As a teacher, I am constantly faced with pressure to have students complete a large quantity of writing assignments. Writing group assignments take more time than independent assignments. But the quality of work produced by students in writing groups is more developed and expanded, and one of the best parts includes students reporting that they appreciate the conversation while writing in writing groups. Should I look to quality of writing rather than the quantity of writing? I conclude that the quality of writing constructed by engaged students should be the prime consideration.

The next time around, I plan for nearly all writing to be composed in a setting dominated by writing groups. Instead of writing in desks and chairs, other settings will be added that include the courtyard, chapel, auditorium, music room, gym, football field, tennis courts, soccer and baseball fields and the track. With 93% of my students involved in sports and arts, I reason that incorporation of their favorite settings with writing is logical and may further improve their writing. Additionally, a group research paper is planned in addition to the traditional, independent research paper. I plan to assess both types of papers and compare the scores from both research assignments in an effort to further support my belief that writing groups produce good quality writing. And in my opinion, that good quality, and how students achieve it within a group setting, will produce another exciting experience for this teacher.

Appendix

The following are additional responses to the questions that I asked after each assignment.

Assignment: Quotation from William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." Act I, scene i.

Question #1 - What conflicts arose in your group when working on analyzing a quote from Shakespeare?

- "Sometimes we disagreed on the interpretation." (Jaylin)
- "My group did not understand some of the words. It was difficult to interpret the quote." (Paulina)
- "We disagreed on who was doing what, and we had different interpretations." (Marissa)
- "We could not agree on the meanings of words. Each of us had our own view with what things meant. This made it difficult to make any progress." (David)
- "A lot of us had different ideas that were all good, so we couldn't decide on one to put down." (Abby)

Question #2 - How did you deal effectively with these conflicts?

- "Our group handled the conflict by discussing the definitions so we could better understand them." (Sara)
- "We handled the conflict by working together." (Paulina)
- "We talked it out and let everyone have a turn." (Autumn)
- "Our group calmly discussed ideas." (Kendall)

- "We told everyone to just get started." (Chris)
- "Our group combined ideas." (Kelly)

Assignment: Another Quotation from William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." Act I, scene i.

Question #1 - List and explain 2 methods of motivation that you use in your writing group?

- "We wanted a good grade." "We wanted to succeed in Kellerland." (students refer to my class and environment by this term, coined years ago) (Rachelle)
- "Wanting to understand Shakespeare and wanting to get good grades motivated us." (Emily)
- "We asked group members questions forcing them to pry open their mouths and talk." (Paulina)
- "We used our bad grade to motivate a group member to make him work harder on the assignment." (Michael)
- "Criticism motivated them to better their writing and make the sheet better." (Jeff)
- "Being supportive of each other so we get the job done well and trying to better each other so we get a great outcome." (Matt)
- "To get the assignment completed well and a little persuasion is all the motivation needed in our group." (Chris)
- "One member of our group had content knowledge." (Abby)

Question #2 - List and explain 2 ways that your own writing is affected from working with your group.

- "My writing was affected because my group member gave suggestions to better the common words I wanted to use." (Rachelle)
- "They change my opinion from input from the group, not just my opinion." (Jaylin)
- "My group helped me use my talents in writing to the best of my ability. I worked with 2 other people, and 3 heads are better than one. They helped me understand the meanings of many words." (Sara)
- "I put more effort into my work because I need to have a good grade, and we are all affected. If I don't understand something, I am not afraid to ask." (Allie)
- "Our group helps me to better explain my ideas, and sometimes compromising has to come into play and I intertwine their ideas with my own." (Kendall)
- "My writing is more specific and precise when I work in the group. I feel supported by what I am writing and feel that it is 100% correct." (Paulina)
- "My writing is affected because when you work in a group, you hear ideas that you might not have come up with yourself." (Katherine)
- "One member helps me to use better words, and the other tells me that everything I do is "bull," and that makes me try a lot harder." (Michael)
- "They give you a different perspective; they think differently, and I can learn from them. They showed me things that I was doing wrong." (Jeff)
- "I sometimes get a deeper meaning out of a quote; it makes it easier for me to think about. I also acquire different styles of writing from others." (Abby)
- "They help me to challenge myself. They help me to look for hidden meaning in what I read. They also help me to go more in-depth in what I read and write." (Kelly)

Question #3 - Explain how your writing group challenges you as a writer?

- "They inspire me to go in depth with hidden meaning and encourage my ideas." (Kelly)
- "I am forced to listen to other's opinions and defend me own views and explain my point of view." (Abby)
- "I want to write better than them (my group) and get a better grade. I have to express my ideas clearly as sometimes there is confusion as to what I am trying to say." (Chris)
- "It doesn't help me because one person takes everything and doesn't allow me to do anything." (Michael)
- "They challenge me when they say that I don't do my share of the work." (David)
- "I am forced to look at other points of view and other people's ideas." (Katherine)
- "They challenge me to learn how to mix different ideas and different pieces of writing and to make sure writing is clear as it possibly can be." (Kendall)
- "They challenge me by using "five-dollar words," and to do my all-time best. My group doesn't let me down, so I can't let them down. It makes me take in ideas and see how we can work to make it better. I get better listening and speaking skills as a writer when using people's ideas and listening to their concerns." (Allie)
- "They challenge me to use my knowledge by discussing the meanings of many words, looking in the Thesaurus and dictionary so I can better understand the complicated words." (Sara)
- "I hear all points of view and can then write a better, more rounded piece on my opinions." (Jaylin)
- " They force me to let others take a turn and put their ideas out there." (Autumn)

Final Assignment: William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116"

Question #1 - What challenges did you encounter with this assignment? How did you meet those challenges?

- "The reading was difficult. You had to use the dictionary for almost everything. I looked for a theme or meaning of surrounding sentences to help understand the one I was reading." (Abby)
- "I had a problem understanding the reading. I looked up the words in a dictionary, but I had a hard time piecing the words together." (Kelly)
- "I ran into the problem of not knowing what the words meant. I met my challenges by looking the words up in the dictionary. I also talked things through with my mom." (Stephanie)
- "Sometimes I could not figure out what certain words meant. To meet this, I pulled out a dictionary and looked up words." (David)
- "I found the assignment to be difficult in the sense of vocabulary and joining sentences. To overcome these challenges, I used a dictionary, and took time to do so, instead of doing less than my best." (Kendall)
- "Well, honestly, I didn't have any real difficulties. I was rather rushed when I did it; however, because time was as scarce as a patch of green grass. I was so hurried that I did not have time to look words up, so I used my prior knowledge of interpretation to translate the sonnet." (Matt)
- "The only challenges were "foreign words" which I quickly looked up in the dictionary. Expressing my sentences clearly, rather than a jumble of undetectable information, was another topic worthy of suggestion." (Chris)
- "My challenge was that I did not understand the meaning of some words. I used a dictionary to find the definition of the words. I also did not understand some of the wording. The verbs were at the end of stanzas and subjects were referred to as "it." I conquered this by finding out the subjects and were supposed to be "it," and by rephrasing the words. I studied the words very carefully and rearranged them. I thought out loud at times." (Paulina)

- "The challenges that I encountered with this assignment were that some words were difficult for me to understand. After I looked in the dictionary, I got a better meaning of the words. However, it was much more difficult to do this assignment individually than with a partner." (Sara)

Question #2 - What skills did you use for this assignment that you have used in your writing group? List all skills.

- "I used my writing skills as well as interpreting skills so I could understand what I was reading, and relate it to the sonnet." (Sara)
- "I used my mother for help and then we attempted to "solve" the sonnet." (Kelly)
- "I used a dictionary and thinking deeply about the writing to help with the assignment. I used resources such as a thesaurus and my mom's opinion. In my writing group, I would always listen to my group member's opinions to gain a different perspective." (Katherine)
- "Sitting, listening, nodding, writing." (Autumn)
- "Skills I used were looking things up in a dictionary. It's a skill because I have to find the definition that fit the situation. I also used critical thinking skills to explain the sonnet. I used transition words to make the ideas flow in my paragraph. I also collaborated with my dad." (Jeff)
- "Skills I used were the dictionary, listening and discussing things, and I also used a time that was set." (Stephanie)
- "I was able to use the dictionary and higher level thinking skills and was able to decipher the poetic language of metaphors and similes." (David)
- "I used my thinking skills and my uncanny ability to look up words in the dictionary." (David)
- "I used my critical thinking skills, and I used a dictionary and thesaurus, and time management." (Kendall)
- "I used my grammar skills and I tried to be descriptive. I also conferred with people for help." (Marissa)
- "I made an outline for each quatrain." (Rachelle)

Question #3 - What have you learned from your writing group that could be of help when given an assignment such as Shakespeare's Sonnet 116? Explain fully.

- "If you do not know the word, look it up. If you don't comprehend it, then sit on the thought a little while." (Chris)
- "Nothing really helped. There was no fun in this assignment." (Allie)
- "Using a dictionary and examining writing sentence by sentence instead of line by line are skills that I have learned from my writing group that helped me to accomplish the assignment. I believe that working in a group helps you to develop skills that you have and take skills from other people. Working with other people can be good because you can develop skills from them and apply them to your own individual work." (Paulina)
- "I have learned to look at all possible perspectives before I finalize my answer to a question. I have also learned to use all possible resources around me to the fullest extent." (Katherine)
- "I just sit and listen while my group throws "wild ideas" around." (Autumn)
- "Some things that I learned are to think things through and don't just write the first decent answer to come up with. I learned to be patient and not fight with group members if the assignment is with a group. I learned what to use to motivate other people in the group." (Jeff)

- "I learned that when you talk things through you are able to form many opinions. Also, you are able to look things up faster too. I learned to get a second opinion." (Stephanie)
- "I have learned many new words to use in my vocabulary. I also was able to better my sentence structure." (David)
- " If I am with my writing group, I have to come up with more "five dollar words" and be more descriptive, and just sharing ideas contributes to the final copy." (Marissa)

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