Reflections on an Online Teachers Writing Group

Participation in an online writing group becomes a thought-provoking experience for author Anne Elrod. Detailing the planning and actual ongoing interactions of the small group, Elrod begins to see parallels and differences between her experience and the experience she gives her student writing groups in her classroom.

Anne Elrod

For the past year, I have experienced fabulous good luck as a writer. Three teachers—two close friends and I—worked together in an online writing group. Through email, we shared our writing with one another and provided thoughtful and thought-provoking responses to one another’s work. Our experience has made me reconsider writing groups in general, and I wonder specifically how our group is both like and unlike the kinds of writing groups many of us have used in our classrooms.

All three of the group’s participants have some experience with student collaboration online; as members of the Bread Loaf Teacher Network, we had involved our classrooms in exchanges—classroom projects in which students in different locations used the Internet to exchange writing, read and respond to a text in common, or collaborate toward a common product online. In those projects, we had seen for ourselves how students rise to the task of communicating online: the audiences outside the classroom can be both more demanding and more genuine than those inside the classroom as, when writing is the only means of communication available between writer and reader, student writers become clearer, more explicit, and more attentive to an audience’s needs.

We all knew, too, that teachers of writing also should write. As writing project teacher-consultants, two of us had even worked together in a writing group before, and we knew what attentive response from a group could do for our writing. Somehow, though, it took us two years as colleagues and friends before we figured out that we could combine all those bits of knowledge, that the same connections that enriched our writing classrooms could enrich our own lives, and that we could stage an exchange of our own—an online writing group just for us.

Context

We three teachers represent a variety of teaching situations and career paths. Vivian Axiotis teaches sophomore English and journalism at Boardman High School, a large suburban school located near Youngstown, Ohio. Vivian has been teaching for fourteen years; in the year immediately preceding this project, she spent a sabbatical writing poetry and visiting her family’s home in Greece. She is also affiliated with the Northeast Ohio Writing Project. Mandy O’Dell Marcum teaches junior and senior English, advanced placement literature and advanced placement language courses, and speech at Lakewood High School, a large rural school in central Ohio. This is Mandy’s fourth year in the classroom. Finally, at the time of the project, I was a teacher in the fourth year of my career, teaching English at Chagrin Falls High School, a small suburban school near Cleveland, Ohio, though I have now returned to graduate school and teach writing at the university level. The three of us met while attending the Bread Loaf School of English, where we became friends and where this project began.
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Writing Group Schedule

Each calendar month, participants will post at least one piece of original writing to the conference. This could be poetry, fiction, professional writing, creative nonfiction, or anything else. Over the next two weeks, participants will read those pieces and provide thoughtful, written responses and comments. Conversation will then continue as it develops naturally, providing further clarification and response as we revise.

| Piece #1       | posted by August 31 |
| Responses to #1| posted by September 15 |
| Piece #2       | posted by September 30 |
| Responses to #2| posted by October 15 |
| (and so on, through May) |

This stemmed in part, I feel, from our failure to include revisions in our schedule, which I will discuss later in this piece.

In addition to the agreed-upon schedule, each of us also defined a set of clear individual goals for the project. These goals varied according to each participant’s context and experience. Vivian, for instance, noted:

I’ve just finished a productive year of writing, and I also attempted to publish. Publishing is challenging and difficult to do. My goal this year will be to send out at least two batches of poems each month. Some of the poems will be new, but some will be poems written/revised this year and at Bread Loaf [Writing Conference] this summer. A larger goal will also be to try to publish a collection of my work. As of now, I have a title and sections, which I am in the process of revising, editing, and reorganizing.

Vivian’s goals grow directly out of the natural concerns she faced as a writer at that time. Understandably, Mandy’s goals and my own differ from Vivian’s; the strength of our group was its willingness and ability to adapt to the needs of its participants. Mandy, for instance, identified her own concerns:

When I went into teaching, my goal was to write in my spare time. As I’ve discovered, there is no spare time. This exchange will hopefully give me the reason that I need to write. I also think it will help me grow emotionally to have Anne and Viv critique my writing. Unlike my partners, this is a somewhat daunting idea for me as I have never...
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(DRAFT)

Untitled Poem

by Mandy O'Dell Marcum

Sapphire made brighter with crimson,
And I watch you blanche in my arms
under this patriotism.
I hold you, I love you, sudden.

Seething steam, smoke clinging to the
vast green sea swallowing us up,
the green you don, green wearing us.
I cry you, I bless you, truly.

Your eyes speak terror, cling to my
hand clasped to your bleeding heartbeat.
Black life leaving you rapidly.
I breathe you, I fear you, only.

My whispers mouth the comfort that
your agony begs; I touch your
red life force, fluttering, fleeing.
I crave you, I mourn you, complete.

Alone among myriad, we
are two become one, beyond here.
Two souls bound in all worlds, all times.
I see you, I know you, always.

(revised)

Colors of Death: A Nurse's Memory of Vietnam

by Mandy O'Dell Marcum

Sapphire made brighter with crimson,
And I watch you blanche in my arms
under this patriotism.
I hold you, I love you, sudden.

Seething steam, gray smoke clings to the
vast green sea swallowing us up,
the green you don, green wearing us.
I cry you, I bless you, truly.

Your eyes shrivel terror, your fingers
clasp my pale hand that clings to your
bleeding heartbeat. Swift black life force.
I breathe you, I fear you, only.

My pink whispers mouth the comfort
your agony begs; I touch your
red pulse, fluttering, fleeing, gone.
I crave you, I mourn you, complete.

My duty was your life, your death.
We were strangers, yet bonded by
silver life sparks, lavender souls.
I'll see you, I'll know you, always.

Figure 2

really had the opportunity to have
someone read my creative writing.
Scary, yes, but thrilling, too. I think it
will give me a new perspective on
myself, my teaching, and my students' feelings.

I cannot emphasize enough how the
breadth of our personal goals contributed to
the group's success.

Simply the inclusion of personal goals
marked an enormous difference between
our group and writing groups I have
established in my classroom; in my
classroom writing groups, I have set all
the goals. Although I would like for all of
my students' classroom experiences to be
as spontaneous and genuine as they can be, I also take seriously my role as the
teacher in sometimes overriding that
authenticity and setting a few goals for
them of my own. I do think, for instance,
that in a college writing course it is
reasonable for me to mandate that we will
all write essays rather than poetry or
fiction. The point may seem obvious, but
I think it's worth emphasizing: classroom
writing groups are different from our own
writing group for the simple reason that
Mandy, Vivian, and I were not taking a
class. A class, at least in the upper grades
and in college, meets for a particular
purpose, and a class has less freedom to
set its own agenda than friends do. Our
own writing group was so flexible and
adaptive in part because it was not a
classroom writing group.

What Happened

At the first of each month (when we
followed the schedule), each of us posted
an original piece of writing to our group
folder. These were usually poems, though
we did allow in our plans for all types of
writing. Then, by the fifteenth of the
month, each of us was to post a response
to the others' work. As a way of
demonstrating how our group worked, I have
chosen to analyze three cases (one for
each poet), each case consisting of one
piece of submitted writing and the two
colleagues' posted responses to that
writing. This analysis was easy to do, for
one advantage of the online writing group
is the resulting word-for-word transcript.
I like arranging student response groups
online for the same reason; students can
go back to the comments again and again
after their initial meeting, both for the
purpose of revising their writing and for
the purpose of analyzing their interaction
in the group. Online writing may seem
especially impermanent because it occurs
in that fuzzy locale called cyberspace, but I
find it is actually especially permanent
because it is, after all, writing.

Our transcript reveals three main sorts of
responses: pointing, questioning, and
suggesting. Though these ways of re-
spending have been described by Peter
Elbow and are now widely used by
teachers in English classrooms, we didn't
set out to respond in any particular way. It
just happened. That our response evolved
in these particular ways is good news for

Figure 3
teaching, since what we are really trying to do in the classroom is elicit the natural, real conversation that adults have about their reading and writing. Too often, when I’ve asked students to respond to writing in groups, their responses have mimicked what they thought I might have said rather than reflecting their genuine reactions as readers. They produce canned “responses” that reveal little about the piece of writing at hand and even less about themselves as readers. What I want to hear instead are the kinds of comments my significant other might make if I read a poem in the kitchen or the comments I might make to friends outside a movie theater about how I had or hadn’t liked the film.

In a presentation to introduce the idea of writing groups, Cheryl Smith, a teacher-consultant of the South Coast Writing Project (California), distributes a piece of writing to small groups and instructs them, “Read it but don’t talk about it yet.” The teachers attending the workshop read the piece and, while waiting for others to finish reading, begin casual conversations. Smith, regathering the group’s attention, asks, “Well, did you talk about it?” Invariably, the group sheepishly admits that they did . . . a little. “That’s response,” says Cheryl. “It’s what you’d say when you’re not really supposed to say anything.” It’s what you really have to say about a piece of writing rather than what you think you are expected to say. Both at Smith’s workshop and in my writing group, people had come together for the explicit purpose of responding to writing, yet in both cases the comments reflected real thoughts and reactions rather than the semifaked responses we so often get in classrooms. While our writing group was intentionally structured, our responses happened more like kitchen or movie-

their classrooms after a transformative writing project summer institute experience, they are dismayed to find that the students in their classrooms show much less enthusiasm for writing than did the teachers in the summer institute. Is our idea especially good, or did we just have the right people trying the idea? In any case, our responses to one another were some of the richest I’ve ever received.

**Pointing.** First, our responses featured specific and detailed pointing. We begin with “I liked” or “I noticed” and then make very specific comments, referring directly to words and lines in the piece. In response to Mandy’s untitled poem, for instance (figure 2), I noted “I liked the form right away. Each stanza seems like its own whole, finished thing. I liked noticing the similarities in structure for each stanza—the ‘I’ statements in the fourth line of each, for instance.” On countless occasions as a teacher, I have made cryptic comments in the margins such as “nice form,” whereas here I actually help my friend by explaining specifically how and why I liked the form. This is information Mandy will actually be able to use in revising this piece or in composing in the future. Vivian, too, uses pointing:

_Here’s what I like. The last line of each stanza that works like a refrain and that changes with each stanza but that continues to build feelings of loss and reverence. I also like the way you mix the real with the surreal in this poem— “you balance in my arms/ under this patriotism” or “cling to my/ hand clasped to your bleeding heartbeat.”_

Responses like these are not only more detailed than any I have provided for my students, but also they are more human.
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Questioning. In addition to specific and thoughtful pointing, we also asked each other questions to indicate areas in the writing that were unclear or confusing. While I have often included questions in my responses to student work, I admit that most of those have been insincere. Rather than asking anything I really wanted to know, I have phrased suggestions in the form of a question, as in “What if you started by introducing the topic, so your reader will know what’s coming up?” rather than the direct advice “Add an introduction.” My questions for a student might be more gentle, but they’re also dishonest. At first glance, they might look like instances of Elbow’s “what if” technique, in which the reader asks “what if” questions as a way of opening up new ways of imagining the work, but I know where my own heart is. My own “what if’s” have been suggestions in sheep’s clothing.

In our conference, on the other hand, we asked for information we really needed, or admitted legitimate confusion. Unable to identify the “you” in Mandy’s poem, Vivian simply asked, “My only real question is ‘Who is the you?’ There are clues in the poem, but I have read it lots of times, and I can’t come up with anything for certain.” About my own poem, “Lake Effect” (figure 4), Mandy wrote, “The first contracting line is a little confusing. I’m not sure I know what you’re trying to say there.” Confused in the middle of Vivian’s poem “Meeting My Grandfathers” (figure 5), Mandy pushes up:

But here’s where I admit my slowness—I am embarrassed to say that I’m stumbling over the Greek—not literally, of course. I’m just finding myself trying to decipher this and failing miserably... I love this poem for its rich (as always) and fascinating imagery and tone and dialogue. And while I love it for those things, it’s leaving me confused... I’ll admit that sometime I struggle with who’s speaking.

Mandy’s questions communicate the needs of a real reader. Who is speaking? What is happening in the piece between all those beautiful images? I especially note her appreciation and respect for what the writer is trying to do. Her compliments are real, not just “nice statements” like those I often use to buffer the criticisms I offer to students. Mandy asks her questions because she really wants to know, and she asks them in a way that communicates what a reward she expects to get when she does understand. The message is “Vivian, please give me more help in understanding the poem, because I know from experience what reward there is in your writing when I do understand it.”

Our habit of questioning is important for at least two reasons. First of all, one of the most difficult things for a writer to do is imagine the reader’s perspective (espe-
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pecially, I suspect, in poetry, and even more especially in the case of less experienced writers). What information is obvious to a reader, and what needs to be spelled out? How thoroughly do I need to explain the context? In writing this article, I have had to consider (at minimum) readers’ familiarity with the writing project concept, writing groups, and poetry, and I have struggled for a balance between making things clear and belaboring the obvious. To solve this problem, I have worked to imagine my reader at the other end, and I will gather response from colleagues and editors several times before it reaches publication. Students, however, rarely have that luxury. Their audience is too often imaginary to begin with (a teacher posing as an audience of colleagues), and too often the only response students get comes at assessment time anyway, when it’s too late to make any changes.

The second feature of our questioning is that we feel safe enough to do it. When student readers can’t understand a text, they tend to attribute the problem to their own lack of expertise. “I must be reading it wrong,” they sigh. I suspect the same thing happens when we place students in response groups; confused by a classmate’s essay, the student feels the problem is in his or her own reading rather than in the other student’s writing. For this reason, the reader will tend to be impressed by the other writer’s smarts (“You’re writing way over my head”) rather than asking the writer to provide more clarity. In the writing group with my two friends, I felt I could confess when I was confused. I felt, in fact, that my friends needed to know, for they surely wanted the message of the piece to get across. If I was having trouble receiving it, they needed to know. I wouldn’t let my friend go on without offering help any more than I would let her sit through dinner with spinach in her teeth.

Suggesting. Finally, some of our comments went beyond asking for information or clarification to suggest specific revisions. Concerned by a change in tone at the end of Vivian’s poem, I mused:

One way to prepare readers a little more for that “final thought” is to have the child prefect it, or preview it, a bit. For instance, when she confronts the eye of the fish, you could hit on the idea of how it’s a gift … and what kind of gift giver gives a fish? (what the child is thinking, “I’m supposed to be grateful for this?”) That she is desperate to leave the table not just because the fish is gross but because of the terrible nature of this “gift”—all it says about her as a foreigner, or the unfamiliarity of all these Greek things, or how she (it seems to me) is ashamed of not liking the fish, and that’s what makes the fish so terrible (an idea you hit on when you say “language I thought I knew” or “should want to, know how to”). All these things would sort of put the final thought in the mouth of the child, as a kind of preview, so that when we get to the final thought at the end it seems logical, and maybe a bit less heavy-handed.

Direct intervention like this does not happen in every writing group, nor do I think it should. My comments here presume a lot of common understanding and trust between the members of our group. For one thing, reading my comments above, I realized I called her work “heavy-handed!” I can say it only because I have said a million other complimentary and specific things right before I say “heavy-handed,” and Vivian and I are close enough for her to know that I’m not commenting on her personality or on her writing as a whole, but just on this one line. In the student writing groups, these factors are not usually the case.

All of the members of our group did sometimes use direct suggestion. Reading my piece “Lake Effect,” Mandy noted,

I love “gathering its grayness,” but I’m not as keen on “gathering myself.”

Maybe it’s the alliteration or just the flow of the first, but the second seems not the right phrase. Maybe “collected”? Maybe “composed”?

“Assembled”? I don’t know, just some basic synonyms.

In suggesting specific words I could use in place of “gathering,” Mandy sends me down a path to revision, whether I use one of her words or not. In contrast, I fear that, noting the same thing in a student’s paper, I might have simply scrawled “Diction?” in the margin—leaving the perplexed student wondering what “diction” means, first of all, and then what specifically is the trouble with the diction in the line.

In an extreme example, Vivian actually suggested a revision of a section by writing and submitting her own version. “It might read like this,” she suggests:

ducking a little even as I gathered scarf and hat, stumped in boots down the steps, crouching a little to look out the frosty window and upward did I contract against it?

Such a hands-on response is risky. As teachers, we have learned to respect the integrity of the writer’s work, asking
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The response that a writing group provides is helpful because it helps us to get to that person on the other end, testing how well a draft is doing the job we want the piece to do.

Adaptivity. In another interesting phenomenon, we tailor and adapt our modes of response according to the needs of each group member. For Vivian, who is revising a book-length collection of poems for publication, we responded fairly aggressively, looking line by line and image by image for the clearest possible presentation. Our comments for Vivian tended to be longer than the others, and we leaned more toward questioning and suggesting than to pointing. Mandy, on the other hand, had not often shared her poetry in the past, and she expressed trepidation at doing so for the first time. Consequently, the bulk of our responses to her early postings took the form of pointing, making many compliments and offering support. We made these adjustments for one another because we are friends, because we care about one another, and because we were aware of each other not only as writers but as human beings. While these considerations feel automatic, in fact some of them can be taught, and I think we should be teaching students sensitivity in reading.

In addition to nurturing the mercy of readers, though, we can teach our students to advocate for their own needs in writing groups. Our poem postings often (though not always) included instructions for the group, ranging from general statements like “let me know what you think” to “please be gentle” to asking specific questions after the piece. Our students can do this too, indicating whether they want validation, help with plot, editing for correctness, or something else.

Problems and Limitations

While rewarding and, I hope, instructive for us as teachers of writing, our online writing group has not been without problems. First of all, we faced within our group the same problem students and teachers face in classes: not everyone came prepared. In fact, I was the worst of all in this regard, letting months go by without posting any work or responding to others’ work without contributing any of my own. In the future, we as a group will have to find ways to ensure that everyone comes with writing. While we laid it out as an explicit part of our original plan, it did not evolve into a norm in the day-to-day operation of the project. That first problem seems to me related to the second: we failed to build in opportunities for revision when we planned our work. We posted new pieces and offered responses to them but then moved on to new pieces without posting further drafts or ever finding out how our friends’ work eventually turned out. While individual members did occasionally revise pieces (both Vivian and Mandy revised pieces included in this article), we did not share those revisions with one another as a matter of course, and time for those revisions was not built into the project. In my writing classroom, I find that the prospect of revisions and an eventual “final draft” keep a group moving forward, motivating response because that response will be used in a later step. Our group lacked that structure, with two unfortunate results: first, we were less motivated to “show up” on a monthly basis than we might otherwise have been, and second, as responders, we were not able to see how the insights and comments we offered in response to drafts prompted revision. Thus we missed chances to become even better responders because we weren’t able to note which kinds of comments proved especially helpful to a colleague in revision and we denied ourselves a satisfying and informative part of the process.

Unfortunately, despite a more strict structure, classroom writing groups often experience the latter flaw too. I gripe that
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kids never revise. I use all sorts of strategies to elicit revision. I quote Don Murray, saying that revision is 80 percent of writing. “Writing is rewriting!” cries a large poster on my wall. And then I rarely, if ever, build in the extra week for revision after each due date. Even this past year, when I vowed to make revision a required, graded step for each paper my students turned in, I actually made revision a requirement only once. I certainly never provided rich fields of response from which to begin revision at a level anywhere near what Vivian, Mandy, and I provided for each other in the group. Instead, as always, my response tended to come too late, in the form of written margin comments after a paper had been turned in for a grade. I continue to do this even though I know the students rarely read the comments, even though I know that the nuggets of writing “wisdom” I impart there do not carry over into the students’ composition the next time. While, in my fantasy classroom, I have time to give students the same kinds of loving responses I give to my friends, the reality is that the forward march of the syllabus and the finite academic term keep us from lingering over any one piece of writing for too long.

Conclusion

I firmly believe that the best opportunities for students to learn to write are those in which they write in real forms for real reasons, and in which a real audience is there to receive the work. Writing groups, both in and out of classrooms, have proven helpful for as long as there have been writers and for the same reason: for writing to be real, it has to have an audience. There has to be a person on the other end. The response that a writing group provides is helpful because it helps us to get to that person on the other end, testing how well a draft is doing the job we want the piece to do. In Vivian and Mandy, I found respondents who could provide that feedback especially well.

My natural impulse is to look for ways to give my students the same experience. Surely an English teacher heaven will be one in which students receive similarly serious, in-depth, thoughtful, and sensitive response to their work every time they write. At the same time, however, I cannot help thinking how different this group was from a classroom. We were not in the project together because the computer put us in the same section, or because we were all the same age, or because we all scored at the same level on an exam. We were under no pressure of evaluation. We had no supervision, and no one was eavesdropping on our interaction.

So how like this experience can I really expect a classroom writing group to be? And, do I want my classroom writing groups to bear the same characteristics of this autonomous one? Classrooms are not the same as friendships, and our goals for students differ from the goals my friends and I brought to our group, but these can be hard truths for a writing project teacher to hear. We value collegiality and mutual respect; we envision the classroom as a community of readers and writers. I talk about my desire for student response that sounds like kitchen conversation, or I depict vividly the love and respect between Mandy, Vivian, and me — and then I have to face the equally vivid image of the student from my high school classroom who rolls her eyes at the mere mention of group work or the students who write their drafts in the thirty seconds before the bell rings on the day they’re due—if they write drafts at all.

Who am I to expect them to form a bond of mutual respect and attention, responding sensitively to one another’s work and encouraging one another with energy and devotion, when so many of them would really rather put their heads down on the desks? It’s like the experience of so many new writing project teachers who leave the summer institute excited — ready to take the amazing activities they saw in the summer and try them in the classroom in the fall — and then are disillusioned to find that what works with highly motivated adult teachers does not necessarily work with students. This is not to say that transfer can’t occur, just that it doesn’t happen in quite the same way. Writing project teachers do find their classrooms transformed by their summer experience, albeit in less sudden form than initially expected. And student writing groups can share attributes with adults’ writing groups, but they’re sure to take significantly different form.

Pointing out the important differences between my online writing group and writing groups in classrooms, I get worried. I almost hear myself saying the unsayable: we’re wasting our time trying to get such results out of our classroom groups. Can that be? Is the classroom such a contrived environment that it’s inhospitable to all the love and care in response that I have enjoyed and that I want for my students? Well, it is contrived. I face that. Classrooms aren’t the same as friendships. And then I set about trying to find the ways in which they can be, points at which lessons from one kind of writing group transfer to the other.

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