

1-1-1990

Responding to Writers: A Multi-Variate Approach to Peer Interaction

Kevin Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/wcj>

Recommended Citation

Davis, Kevin (1990) "Responding to Writers: A Multi-Variate Approach to Peer Interaction," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1204>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Responding to Writers: A Multi-Variate Approach to Peer Interaction

Kevin Davis

I keep noticing, and being bothered by, the rigidity with which students interact and respond to other's writing. Let me offer three examples:

1. Not long ago, I tape-recorded in-class peer groups as members discussed drafts of their papers. At the taping, about twelve weeks into the semester, each student had developed an approach to commenting, and the rest of the group yielded right-of-way on those areas. Group members had assumed roles from which the group was unwilling to deviate. One student focused her comments on concern with audience, and another with his concerns over organization and meaning. After these group members had expressed their ideas about the high-or concerns, they addressed mechanical aspects by turning the papers over to another member, saying, "Okay, Shelley, do your thing."

2. Last fall, at a writing center conference, I offered ethical dilemmas for the consideration of an audience of tutors. In each of my case scenarios, I had carefully constructed scenarios in which (I thought) common sense approaches would conflict with tutoring approaches. Almost unanimously, the audience members were unwilling to deviate from their in-grained tutoring approaches, even if adherence to the approach would cause a student to fail or would reflect poorly on the writing center or the tutor. Expediency and common sense were far less important to the tutors than was rule adherence. The tutors were so content with their well-trained positions that they were unwilling to deviate in the slightest.

3. As writing center director, I regularly receive informal reports on tutors from students and faculty. Recently, a student stopped me in the hall,

saying, “I just want to tell you how great the writing center tutors are, especially Mary. She’s really tough.” That encounter got me thinking, and I soon realized that all the reports (good and bad) about Mary said she was tough, that all the reports about Missy said she was thorough, that all the reports about Cammy said she was kind and gentle. My own tutors, much as I emphasize flexibility in their training, are role-comfortable and set in their ways. Their flexibility derives from their being different from one another, not within each individual.

I find all these cases problematic. If student response to writing is going to help the writer, then it needs to be writer-centered, that is, individuals responding to what the writer needs, not to what the reader feels comfortable responding to. If writing centers are going to remain the homes of flexible, student-centered approaches to instruction, the tutors have to be willing and able to deviate from usual patterns under special circumstances. If tutors are to help a variety of writers with a variety of anxieties and difficulties, then tutors have to meet the writers on their own terms, not on some predisposed personality plateau. Is this rigidity something we create or something we cultivate? What can we do to promote more flexible approaches for writing conversation?

Where Does It Come From?

Rigid approaches to solving writing problems come in part, I suspect, from human nature. It’s natural to assume and maintain comfortable positions. Problem-facing is easier if we always call on the same schematic approach.

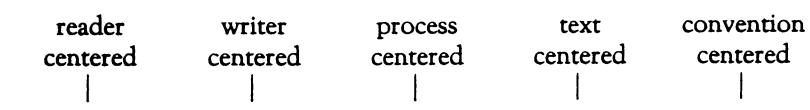
The inflexibility also comes, I imagine, from us, the teachers and writing center directors who promote student response to writing. When we respond to papers, most of us generally respond in the same ways, with a personally comfortable mix of accolades and condemnations; in this way we model systematic, inflexible behaviors. When we train tutors, most of us emphasize a particular approach to tutoring, one which we ourselves might rely on when we tutor; in this way we perhaps inadvertently train tutors to always rely on what feels most comfortable to the tutor, not to the writer. When we ask student peer groups to discuss their own writing, most of us expect them to do the same types of analysis week after week, never altering their tasks nor their roles; in this way we suggest that all response to all writing is the same, unaffected by individual situations or goals.

Finally, inflexibility comes from the ideas we read and endorse. If we always find ourselves agreeing and disagreeing with the same theoreticians in the literature, then we are narrowing our position into pedagogically limited approaches. I don’t mean to belittle the complex positions taken by our

most prominent theoreticians, but most of us tend to extract usable algorithms from their complexities. Taken in its simplest form, this means that when we emphasize student response to writing, we either emphasize Bruffee's ideas about conversation or Reigstad and McAndrew's ideas about providing order and logic, because the two concepts are, at least to a large degree, mutually exclusive. We expect student respondents either to look actively at texts, identifying weaknesses as Lorch suggests, or we expect them to serve more passively as a social audience, as Hawkins supports, because they can't really do both at once. We expect that our student readers will call on their human instincts, which Hartwell thinks will serve them well or on their pedagogical and linguistic expertise, which Brannon and Knoblauch suggest as important, because human instincts are frequently at odds with professional advice.

A Multi-Variate Approach

I would like to suggest, then, an approach that allows us to consider simultaneously all of these variables. I am not suggesting a new approach for responding to writers with peer interaction; I am suggesting a concept that allows us to identify and gain perspective on the rigid approaches student respondents assume when reacting to writers and on the rigid approaches we might inadvertently encourage when training peer tutors or planning tasks for in-class groups. First, we need to consider how writing conversations are focused: what do students talk about first? Where do they start? There are several sensible responses to these questions, and they can be diagrammed on an axis, like this:



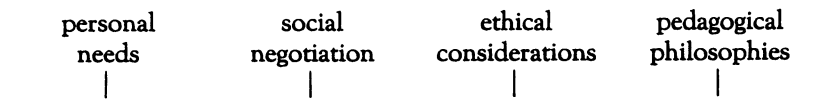
This axis is a notationally simple way of locating several complex approaches to writing response. When a peer group starts its work or when a tutor begins a session with a writer, participants can choose to start anywhere along this axis. Peer groups, my experience suggests, tend to work at the reader/writer-centered end of the spectrum. Writers say, "This is what I was trying to do here," and peers respond by saying, "But this is what I understood." My writing center tutors probably prefer to start at the text-centered point, discussing meaning and organization right from the start ("Now what was it you were trying to do in this paper?"), but writers who come in the writing center usually want to begin with questions of convention adherence ("I just want you to proofread it.").

I am not suggesting that any of these approaches is preferable; each of them has its own merits. I am, however, suggesting that we need to acknowledge our own preferences for one or two points on that axis. We also need to recognize that the theorists we admire, the tasks we design for our peer groups, and the strategies we teach our tutors inherently support only one or two of the many possible positions that can be assumed.

Whether the inflexibility that comes when a respondent insists on always working at one and only one point is due to human nature, to a training program that emphasizes a particular approach, or to unilateral acceptance of theoretical perspectives, many tutors and other peer readers inflexibly head for a single point of the focus continuum, refusing to consider alternatives. That's what I learned when I tape-recorded in-class peer groups: each member regularly assumed one and only one particular role, a role that the rest of the group deferred to at a particular moment.

Because of this inflexibility, effectiveness is compromised whenever the conversation's focus remains at a single point. When a tutor heads for the center areas of the focus axis and a student heads for the convention end, the two are working at cross purposes, setting up a potentially frustrating session for the tutor and a potentially worthless session for the writer.

Once we have considered where peer writing conversations might be focused, we need also to consider why they are focused in those particular areas. How do participants decide where to start a writing conversation? What decision-making constraints lead them in those directions? Again, several answers are logical, and they can be illustrated as below:

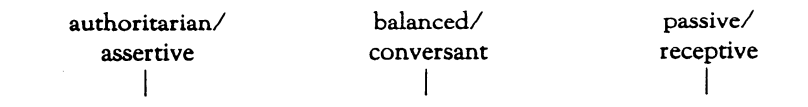


The students in my peer group were working from the socialnegotiation point on this axis. After twelve weeks and numerous group activities, they had established mutually negotiated role-and-order conventions. I doubt, for example, that Shelley selected the role of grammar-thug, but she had accepted that as her position within the group.

Most writing center tutors, on the other hand, probably begin from a tutoring philosophy, a pedagogical perspective for what they do. My experiences with the tutors attending my conference presentation indicate to me that tutors, in general, are hesitant to move off of their position, to consider ethical dilemmas created by their position or to engage in much social negotiation with the writer.

To compound the writing center problem, many writers visit the center out of personal need, and they are therefore hesitant to negotiate a position as well. Thus, when a student stops me and says, “Mary is great; she’s tough,” he’s saying “Mary’s pedagogical philosophies were right in line with my personal needs.” Conversely, when a student says, “Mary really upset me; she’s too tough,” he’s saying “Mary’s pedagogical philosophies were not in line with my personal needs; she wanted me to address things I didn’t want to consider.” In both cases, I’m afraid, neither tutor nor student adjusted positions because of social or ethical decisions; they just happened to have complementary or adversarial perspectives.

Third, we need to consider how the participants in a writing conference work together. Who takes charge? How does this happen? Why are some conversations combative while others are not? The following axis depicts a range of conversational interaction:



During conversation, whether in writing groups or elsewhere, participants assume positions along this range. For writing conferences, however, it’s interesting to note how these positions might facilitate or hinder effectiveness.

In the peer group I tape recorded, the members fluctuated wildly from one end of the spectrum to another. They had negotiated a behavior that made them alternately authoritarian and receptive. During one segment, for example, Shelley became authoritarian as she spoke about each paper’s mechanical and usage peculiarities. During the entire rest of the session, however, Shelley was entirely passive/receptive, not even speaking up when asked direct questions about her own writing. Other groups might work differently. Some groups, I imagine, are more conversant. Still others might be consistently dominated by a single member.

In the writing center, such carefully delineated positions and performance are unusual, so the tutor and the writer must explore and cooperate as they establish their conversational interaction. But saying that a tutor must merely be conversational at all times is ignoring potential problems. If the writer is passive, a conversational tutor will have difficulty conversing with a reticent partner. Conversely, a tutor might also have trouble conversing with a writer who wants to dominate and direct the session, preferring to ask particular questions.

Practical Suggestions

In a vertical format, the axes are like menus in a Chinese restaurant where diners are permitted to take one item from column A, one from column B, and one from column C:

Conversation Focus	Methodological Approach	Interactive Style
Reader	Personal	Assertive
Writer	Social	Balanced
Process	Ethical	Passive
Text	Pedagogical	
Conventions		

The axes are of descriptive value, I think, but do they offer anything beyond a categorical schema for identifying what goes on in writing conversation? I think they do.

We could use the first area, conversation focus, to demonstrate the range of concerns upon which a writing discussion might center. At varying points in the writing process, in fact, each writer is probably concerned with each point along the axis. It's important for group members and tutors to realize that, depending on the situation, a discussion might start, remain, or migrate throughout this spectrum.

Tutors, in particular, need to recognize that their systematic tutoring process might, in fact, be at odds with a writer's composing process. Tutors must be flexible, willing to discard their procedure manual in order to accommodate a particular writer. They must realize—as the participants in my conference presentation did not—that writing center procedures need to remain flexible, not algorithmic.

We could use the second area, methodological approach, to demonstrate the different methods participants in a writing conference can use to negotiate a structure for their responses. In my experience, tutors tend to work only from pedagogically based philosophies—perhaps reflecting the advocacy of their trainers—too frequently forgetting to consider ethical and social questions inherent in their work. Peer groups, on the other hand, tend to work strictly from personal and social perspectives, unaware of ethical or pedagogical questions.

The third area, interactive style, allows us to consider how conversation participants interrelate. Tutors and peer group members both need to understand that true conversation is a balanced exchange between all members. Two assertive conversants will clash audibly while two passive speakers may clash silently. Tutors in particular need to understand how to

recognize the writer's conversational position and adjust their own to keep the exchange as balanced as possible.

In presenting this multi-variate, Chinese-menu schema, I'm hoping to demonstrate the range of options available to writing conversation participants. Sometimes, I imagine, excess rigidity in individuals comes from a firm, unyielding belief in a particular ideology; such ideological rigidity commands a certain amount of admiration. However, in writing peer groups and writing center tutorials, I'm afraid that such rigidity comes primarily from the participants' inability to understand completely the options available to them; this rigidity of omission keeps writing conversations from reaching their full potential.

Works Cited

- Brannon, Lil, and C.H. Knoblauch. "A Philosophical Perspective of Writing Centers and the Teaching of Writing." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 36-47.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 3-15.
- Hartwell, Patrick. "The Writing Center and the Paradoxes of Written-Down Speech." *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration*. Ed. Gary A. Olson. Urbana: NCTE, 1984. 48-61.
- Hawkins, Thom. "Intimacy and Audience: The Relationship between Revision and the Social Dimension of Peer Tutoring." *College English* 42 (1980): 64-69.
- Lorch, Sue. "Must Tutors Really Be Nice?" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 9 (1983): 145-48.
- Reigstad, Thomas, and Donald A. McAndrew. *Training Tutors for Writing Conferences*. Urbana: NCTE, 1984.

Kevin Davis, a member of the NWCA executive board, teaches writing, directs the writing center, and unofficially nurtures the writing-across-the-curriculum program at East Central University in Oklahoma.