

1-1-2005

Review: Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom

Roberta D. Kjesrud

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

Recommended Citation

Kjesrud, Roberta D. (2005) "Review: Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1575>

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.

Review: *Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom*

Beverly Moss, Nels Highberg, and Melissa Nicolas, eds.
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum/IWCA Press, 2004

by Roberta D. Kjesrud

Having just turned the last page in Beverly Moss, Nels Highberg, and Melissa Nicolas's book, *Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom*, I am still marveling at the impressive array of writing-group contexts represented by the articles included in this edited volume. As a writing center director whose program has made several fledgling (mostly failed) attempts at facilitating group work, I began the book eagerly, expecting an authoritative prescription for structuring meaningful writing-group experiences. When no such prescription emerged in the reading, however, I quickly adjusted my expectations. At times frustrated and at others enchanted by the scrumptious complexity, I savored the book as a meal, one layered with flavors that enrich my appreciation of writing groups in all their manifestations.

The breadth of contexts represented in the book is nothing short of astonishing. While we in the academy may think such groups are our bailiwick, in truth, they're everywhere—in prisons, in The Hood, in the community, and, naturally, in the academy, too. Even Part I of the book, limited to academic writing groups, samples a range of contexts. For example, some writing groups (Anderson and Murphy; Gilewicz), are situated in familiar contexts—the writing center and the composition classroom. Less typically, Thomas, Smith, and Barry's group is situated in the sciences. Some (Hessler and Taggart) straddle the college and the community. Still in the academy but focused on groups composing joint texts, Day and Eodice and Piontek study very different writing group constituents, faculty and freshmen. And in a surprising departure from the typical campus, Jackson's freshman comp writing group takes place in a men's prison.

About the Author

Roberta Kjesrud began her writing-centered career as an undergraduate tutor in the Western Washington University Writing Center, the program she currently coordinates. She organizes biannual staff development days for Puget Sound-area writing center directors and serves as president of the Pacific Northwest Writing Centers Association. In addition to published articles in The OWL Construction and Maintenance Guide and Writing Center Perspectives, she is interested in play theory, strength-based reader response, and writing center assessment.

If context is the most notable dimension represented in the menu of contents, several socio-political ingredients emerge in the reading. Taken together, the volume's writing groups reflect society's major fault lines, including age, gender, ethnicity, and class. Consider the following sampling: In "Questions of Time: Publishing and Group Identity in the *StreetWise* Writers Group," the authors consider the tensions inevitable in a response group featuring homeless writers on the socio-political and economic margins. In "A Group of Our Own: Women and Writing Groups: A Reconsideration," the authors discuss the benefits of creating a feminine space for synthesizing women's lives within the male-dominated literacy of the academy. And while this is the only essay that specifically analyzes writing groups using the lens of gender, the editors, in their closing remarks, note that the very limited presence of male authors in the volume suggests something (what?) about the engendered nature of writing groups.

Given the varied contexts and themes these editors present, readers may be slightly disappointed that the volume omits any consideration of writing groups situated in virtual contexts. True, the editors bemoan that same lack; nevertheless, as my writing center now conducts fully one third of its sessions in a digital environment, I'm still regretting this absence. Further, readers may share my annoyance with the curricular/extracurricular taxonomies the editors create. At best, the distinctions seem arbitrary. For example, the women-only group, situated in Part II, "Writing Groups in the Extracurriculum," deals with academics writing for decidedly curricular purposes. At worst, the distinctions suggest an unsettling town-gown binary. Both academic and community groups can certainly learn from each other through this volume, but the distinctions unnecessarily "other-ize" the different contexts.

In the midst of reading, readers may be perplexed about just what lessons the editors mean us to take from their *mélange*. Not-yet-in-recovery pragmatists would probably be happier with a volume titled, *Ten Easy Steps to Implementing Wildly Successful Writing Groups*. Readers should not expect transparent principles they can apply immediately to practice. In fact, even the editors express this frustration. In a highly ingenuous "Afterword," they confess that the volume raises for them more questions that it settles. While the chaos may frustrate practitioners, it will delight scholars. Truly provocative research such as this seldom yields tidy conclusions; instead, it reveals a delightful profusion.

It's out of the profusion that readers will find sustenance. For instance, I'm now seeing required classroom writing groups as a value-laden, political act. Warned by the inmate who "won't talk to blacks," I understand how imposing collaborative groups, despite my benevolent intent, can be hegemonic, especially in an academy institu-

tionalizing individual rewards. How is mandated collaboration truly collaborative? Similarly, I've shifted to a less-glowing vision of collaborative learning. As a writing center director, I'm drawn by the ideals of social constructionism. But this volume has helped me remember my undergraduate mindset toward collaborative work—I dreaded the inherent negotiation and stalemate. When does collaboration's seamy underbelly—conflict—hamper literacy and learning? Finally, I'm struck by the relational dimension of writing groups. Words like "love" and "trust" don't leap to mind in my classroom- and center-based groups, yet they resonate in the testimonies of community group participants. How should I foster such values in writing groups sponsored by the academy?

Make no mistake—writing groups are a confusing enterprise, as this volume amply demonstrates. Their very purpose, responding to writers and shaping their writing, combines the difficult tasks of illuminating writing and thinking while considering the angst and affect of writers. Frankly, it's a wonder these groups work at all. We shouldn't be surprised that, in a discussion challenging us with a complex array of psychological, social, and intellectual dimensions, we may not reach consensus about writing groups. But it's this very feature—the lack of conclusion—that provides the volume's greatest strength. In effect, the book acts as a renewable feast. When we read the volume with one guiding question, "What's the best way to implement writing groups?" we will be fed differently than when we read with another, "How do power relationships affect writing groups?" Whether we're eating steak or vegan, Thai or Tahitian, this book has our entrée. Bon appetit!