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Volume 5
Issue 2 *Volume 5 Issue 2 / Volume 6 Issue 1*

Article 5

1-1-1985

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Recommended Citation
Sollisch, James (1985) "From Fellow Writer to Reading Coach: The Peer Tutor's Role in Collaboration," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2, Article 5.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1908

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From Fellow Writer to Reading Coach: The Peer Tutor's Role in Collaboration

James Sollisch

In the basic writing program at The University of Akron, we have been using peer tutors as facilitators of collaborative learning in the classroom for two years. One day a week, each tutor has a group of six to eight students who are usually working on rough drafts. Recently, when I began training peer tutors for our program, I became interested in the role of the tutor in collaborative learning.

As I observed group sessions, I'd typically find the tutor struggling to involve students in discussion. The tutor asked most of the questions, showing the writer what he needed to do to improve the draft. The few students who did get involved offered revision suggestions in the form of "If it was my paper, I'd rewrite the part about such and such." Or "You should go back to your freewriting and see if you have a better idea to focus on." The sessions typically ended with the student and the tutor fairly satisfied—they had fulfilled their mission. They would look to me for approval. I would smile, feeling uneasy, not able to share fully in their satisfaction. Something seemed out of focus.

As I observed more and more sessions, I found much the same pattern. Slowly, I realized what was wrong: the tutors and the students, unaware of their role as readers in the collaboration process, were relying too heavily on their role as writers. Writers refocus, add examples, rephrase sections of their text, or start again because they feel something is wrong and will interfere with a reader's comprehension. The writers whose papers were read in collaboration had not already made the suggested revisions because they had not foreseen the confusion their readers would feel. Group members, acting as writers, told students what to change, so little learning took place. But if group members act as readers, articulating their process of interpreting the text, student writers will see and feel their readers' confusion and understand the need for revision. Student writers will begin to learn why writers revise.

Although collaboration can be approached as a process by which a group of writers revise student papers, I do not feel this is the best approach. Ideally, collaboration is a group reading exercise whereby a writer receives a variety of responses made by readers and then figures out how to adjust his writing to satisfy those readers' needs and responses. It is important to note here that reading and listening are parallel processes since collaboration usually involves listening, not reading. According to Kenneth Goodman in *Language and Literacy*, Volume I, both reading and listening require the participant to reconstruct meaning by drawing on language cues. Goodman sees no substantial difference, other than the obvious physiological ones, between reading and listening.

I believe writing centers can provide the impetus to build classroom environments in which collaboration can become a true exchange between writer and readers. Those of us in charge of training peer tutors (and that job usually falls to writing center personnel) should show tutors that their job has an important dichotomy: when working one-on-one with students, peer tutors are readers who are also writing coaches, sharing their newly found knowledge of the writing process with tutees. When working with groups of students, whether in the classroom or the center, peer tutors need to be reading coaches or facilitators, leaving their role as fellow writers behind.

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In training peer tutors, we should also define the goals and objectives of these two roles. The goals of the one-on-one tutorial have been well-defined in *The Writing Tutor* by Marian Arkin and Barbara Shollar and in other resource books for writing centers. We can define the goals of the tutor's role in collaboration in this way: 1) to be a role model of a careful, attentive reader/listener; 2) to encourage the group to respond as thoroughly as possible to the piece of writing; 3) to encourage the group to articulate what happens to them as readers or meaning-makers as they listen to the writing. Once peer tutors understand these goals and their role in the collaboration process, they can make these goals clear to students.

Once I discovered the importance of defining the tutor's role in collaboration as that of reading coach, I began to modify their training. Previously, every writing problem had been approached from the writer's viewpoint: tutors were encouraged to figure out what they would do as writers to overcome a problem and then how they would translate that solution to a tutee. (This approach works well for the one-on-one tutorial but not so well as preparation for collaboration.) Later, we began to look at writing problems as readers; we began to discover how our reading processes worked; eventually we were able to determine how readers behave and what they expect from a text. We then began to translate this knowledge into strategies to be used in group collaborations.

We started by reading copies of student papers. I asked the tutors to read the paper and record their reading processes as they went along. I encouraged them to stop as often as they needed in order to record their thoughts or to reflect on their process. It was immediately clear that they were all reading for the larger meaning, following the question, "What is this writer trying to tell me?" No one mentioned topic sentence in the recorded readings, but all had looked for focus by asking "What is the point here?" Or "How does this all fit together?" We discussed the habit readers have of asking questions and how this questioning goes on unconsciously during the reading process.

Next we discussed how long a reader could put off answering the questions of focus before she became angry and frustrated. Most of the tutors agreed that a writer could withhold that information for a few sentences but that once the focus was known, a reader should be able to go back and see how those first sentences fit into a pattern of meaning. We agreed that as readers we could not be comfortable reading a text that had no real focus, a problem that characterizes so many basic writing students' texts. As readers, tutors were especially frustrated by points or statements that seemed to them to be totally off focus or that led them to predict a focus that the writer did not intend. This frustration led to a discussion of hypothesis and prediction—the most obvious and useful parts of the reading process for purposes of collaboration.

I feel it is important to note here that while none of the observations discussed in this paper are new or even scratch at the surface of current theory, they are important because they were "discovered" by the tutors themselves. I could have had the tutors read Kenneth Goodman's model of the reading process or Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* (both of which, later, we discussed), but to have offered them theory on the process before they had felt the process would have been a confusing gift at best. What is important here is the process by which tutors learn about becoming readers and about helping others to become readers.

In our next session, to test predictability, I read aloud an essay by a professional writer and stopped at random places, asking the tutors to predict what would come next. First we predicted the actual content of what would come next, but later, and more importantly, we predicted what kind of idea would come next: an example, an

explanation, a new idea, a generalization. We agreed by the end of the essay that professional texts, while full of small surprises that make the reading worthwhile, are fairly predictable to attentive readers. We agreed that predictability is the key feature of a finished text as opposed to a freewriting or a draft-in-process.

Next we tested predictability by reading pieces of student writing. Below is an example of a basic writing paper from early in the semester. I record it here as I read it aloud, with breaks to discuss the tutors' predictions and comments.

(1) School is not easy for me.

(2) Plus I don't like to sit and study for a long time.

Predictions among tutors ranged from "I think he'll tell us what the consequences of his attitude toward school were" to "I think he'll show us all the things he did to avoid studying." The group took these first two sentences as roughly making up the writer's topic sentence based on their knowledge of student texts.

(3) All the way through high school I went to summer school.

(4) And did not like it at all, but I think it helped me through my years at school.

The tutor who predicted the writer would tell about the consequences of his attitude toward school thought she was correct when I read sentence three. But sentence four seemed to introduce a new idea. Predictions now were more uniform: "He'll show us some examples of how summer school straightened him out." One tutor added that possibly the writer would relate this back to his beginning, showing how his bad attitude forced him to get help and then to become a successful student.

(5) I'm going to need more help in my life but I know I will have to do some things myself in the future.

The group agreed we were lost in a haze of predictability. But we were convinced that if we could get the student writer to observe our predictions, he could rewrite the draft successfully. No tutor felt she could make a reasonable prediction at this point.

(6) My teachers in high school did not help as much as they could because they had at least six classes a day.

We agreed that a new idea had been introduced; the group felt able to predict again: "I think he'll tell about how you need to learn to depend on yourself." One tutor thought the writer would go on to criticize teachers and give examples.

(7) Plus they had things after school like sports, counsel meetings or band class.

(8) So I had to start to do work and sit and study on my own it was all up to me to do my work, and I did.

The group agreed that both predictions had been correct. He criticized teachers and told how he had to become more independent to succeed.

Next I told them that the text was about to conclude and asked them to predict with what point or points the writer would leave us. There were three main predictions among the eight tutors: 1) He'd leave us with the moral of independence. 2) He'd bring summer school back in and say it taught him how to become self-sufficient. 3) He'd go back to his first two sentences and show how his bad attitude had surprisingly led him to succeed by forcing him to work harder and gain independence. The text concludes,

(9) That is how I got to Akron U.

As I read the conclusion, a groan could be heard from the group—their frustration was clear. We discussed the inappropriateness of the conclusion and how it revealed that the writer simply did not know where he had been leading us. Clearly, this draft was not yet a text.

This group was very excited about the possibility of using this prediction exercise in some way in their collaboration sessions with students. They were optimistic that if writers could see how readers reacted to their ideas and what readers expected to find out, then the writers would be able to revise successfully. More importantly, writers would know why they were revising.

We spent a few more weeks "practicing" the reading process and looking for ways to use this process in our collaboration sessions. Our goal was to become readers who could articulate their processes as fully as possible. In discussing a text we tried to respond always as readers, not as fellow writers or teachers. For example, instead of saying, "I think your focus should be stronger" or "If it was my paper, I'd take out the part about so and so," tutors began to say, "Your first few sentences made me think your focus was so and so, but then around sentence five I started thinking so and so was your focus" or "I tried to see how that detail fit in with your paper, but I couldn't. At first I thought it related to your focus, but then I thought it was preparing me for your conclusion." Within a few weeks, tutors were beginning to act more like readers and to prompt students to act more like readers too.

At first, tutors became role models of readers for their groups. But this did not cause automatic reader response—the group still responded as writers, if at all. So instead of directing questions to the writer as most tutors do, tutors began to ask members of the group direct questions about their reading process to elicit responses—questions such as "Kim, when John first started reading his paper, what did you think it was going to be about?" or "John, reread that section about the basketball coach. Now, Kim, how does that fit in with his focus?"

In theory, this direct approach should work perfectly, but nothing in collaboration among peers works perfectly, except occasionally by chance. Tutors reported that the direct questions were helpful, but if used too often, they became cumbersome. Also, tutors complained that these questions gave them too dominant a role in the collaboration process. There were spots of improvement, a slow development of reader awareness on the students' part, but tutors are an impatient lot when they get a taste of success. I suggested they try any exercise they wanted as long as it encouraged students to see their role as readers. A few successful strategies developed.

One tutor experimented with a prediction exercise similar to the one we had done in our sessions. In his group of eight basic writers, he had each writer read the first sentence of her rough draft aloud. He then asked the group to predict what would come next and to give a reason. Next the writer read sentence by sentence, stopping after each one for the group to discuss their predictions. A variation on this exercise is to have the writer read aloud his topic sentence or—if he does not have one—to say what his focus is. The group then roughly predicts what the paper will be about and how it will be written. Finally, the entire paper is read and compared with reader expectations.

Another tutor devised an exercise in which the writer reads her paper, leaving out the topic sentence or the sentence that reveals her focus. Students then predict what her focus or topic sentence is, showing the writer which information helped them and which information did not seem to fit.

Tutors report that these prediction exercises work well. Groups respond more

fully and with more enthusiasm than usual. And more importantly, these exercises force students to be careful readers, to participate actively in the meaning-making of the text.

Teachers in our program also seem pleased with these exercises. Collaboration has become more meaningful because students are becoming more active and tutors have found and begun to understand the role of collaboration in the writing process. As a result, papers are improving as writers get useful responses from their groups. But the greatest implication in this shift of emphasis from the group as fellow writers to the group as fellow readers is this: as students practice articulating their reading processes, they become more careful readers. And as they become more aware of a reader's role in meaning-making, they begin to develop that doubled-edged awareness that all good writers need to satisfy their partners in the marriage of communication that is writing.

James Sollisch teaches basic writing at the University of Akron. He has published other pedagogical articles as well as criticism and short stories. Presently, he is working on a second novel (the first was finished last fall and is looking for a publisher).