Peer Response in the Composition Classroom: An Alternative Genealogy

This article reexamines the historical emergence of peer response as a pedagogical technique in composition classrooms. It first reviews Anne Ruggles Gere’s influential account of that history, focusing on how that account was shaped by process pedagogy, collaborative learning theory, and ideologies of classroom authority and student autonomy. Then the author explores an alternative genealogy in which peer response emerges out of classroom practices of recitation and correction. The purpose of this rereading of peer response’s history is to reconfigure teacher and student agency and also to suggest how historical analysis can enable or constrain present-day practices.

Peer response as we know it today is a child of the 1980s. Although composition instructors have been using some form of peer response in American classrooms since the late nineteenth century, it was not until the advent of theories of process (in the 1960s and 70s) and collaborative learning (in the 1980s) that modern practices took their current form. As its popularity grew, scholars and researchers began paying more attention to the use of peer-response groups in the teaching of composition. Throughout the 1980s, when scholarly interest in peer response reached its zenith, compositionists tended to focus either on practical teaching strategies (for example, George; Grimm; Spear), analysis of response-group conversations (for example, Berkenkotter; Gere and Abbott; Gere and Stevens), or theories of collaborative learning that justify the use of peer response (for example, Bruffee; Trimbur, “Collaborative Learning”).

One notable exception to these approaches is Anne Ruggles Gere’s 1987 Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications. Writing Groups was—and still is—the only scholarly work to trace the history of peer response from its origins in the late nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century. Drawing on extensive archival and documentary work, the first two chapters of Gere’s book demonstrate the value of understanding current practices through careful historical analysis. As in any historical scholarship, that analysis is more than a
simple narration of facts. Indeed, much of the enduring appeal of Writing Groups is due in large part to its use of history to show how peer response “highlight[s] the social dimension of writing” (3). That is to say, Gere’s history of peer response supports theories of collaborative learning and language acquisition espoused elsewhere in Writing Groups.

Gere argues that peer response has two origins—one inside the academy, in the form of literary societies and writers’ clubs, and one outside the academy, in the form of self-improvement groups. Even in academic settings, Gere argues, peer response emerged first outside the curriculum and was only gradually appropriated as a pedagogical technique for composition courses. By locating its origins both outside the curriculum and outside of school settings altogether, this genealogy distances peer response from pedagogical environments. It envisions a period when response to writing occurred spontaneously and naturally, as it were, among status equals and outside the influence of a teacher whose authority could undermine the power of collaborative learning among autonomous peers. It is this theory of learning that is at stake in Gere’s historical analysis.

Historical analysis is always a product of its own time. As Gere observes in her more recent Intimate Practices, “[r]epresentations of former ages . . . change with the times. History or what we say about the past has to do with the present more than with what happened at another time” (269). The history presented in Writing Groups is no exception. Nearly twenty years after its publication, it provides a valuable window onto the way peer response was conceptualized and promoted in the 1980s. One aim of this essay is to explore how Gere’s telling of history was shaped by its own historical moment. Such work is important, because current peer response practices have their roots in that decade. Gere’s history itself remains influential. If we fail to reconsider such narratives, or entertain multiple ones, then we limit ourselves to the assumptions that shaped them whether we intend to or not. The theories (and ideologies) about authority and autonomy that influenced this history prevail, and they constrain ways of thinking about the role teachers play in student learning. History, or “what we say about the past,” does not just reflect its own time but also shapes how we are likely to think about things in the future.

It is time to revisit the history of peer response. I develop in this essay an account of the emergence of peer response that differs from the one offered in Writing Groups. This alternative genealogy accomplishes two things: First, it helps me interrogate Gere’s representation of the extracurricular origins of peer response, the model of learning implied in that representation, and the conditions that shaped this account. Specifically, I want to reconsider the ways in which the history presented in Writing Groups configures teacher authority and student autonomy. In this sense its subject is both peer response at the turn of the twentieth
century and peer response as it developed in the 1980s. Second, and more important, this alternative genealogy recovers a notion of student and teacher agency that moves beyond the prevailing authority/autonomy binary. By showing how peer response emerged as a way for teachers to manage the exigencies of the writing classroom, this alternative history refigures students and teachers as coparticipants in the practices of writing instruction.

I will not argue that these two genealogies are mutually exclusive or that we must choose between them. The two versions of history presented here do not so much contradict each other as much as they simply emphasize different factors in the emergence of peer response in composition classrooms. My larger point is that decisions about what to foreground in our narrative histories are shaped by the circumstances of their telling and, once told, they enable or constrain future practices. At the end of this essay, I turn briefly to my own teaching and classroom research to illustrate how different theories of learning—and their histories—have real consequences.

A Golden Age of Peer Response

Before laying out the alternative genealogy, it is important first to look more closely at the version of history represented in Writing Groups. Gere’s first chapter, which discusses peer response in academic institutions, argues that peer response groups originated in college literary societies of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those societies, such as The Spy Club at Harvard and Criterion at Yale, were both social clubs and “forums in which students debated public issues” (10). Central to such groups was the production of “literary exercises” such as “orations, compositions, forensic debates, disputations, humorous dialogues, essays, or music/drama productions,” which would be critiqued by other members. It is this double activity of production and critique that Gere focuses on: “When they began presenting and receiving criticism on their work, students in literary societies inaugurated what we would call writing groups.” These societies “created the office of critic,” or at least a critic who was not a central authority, like a teacher (12). In this way Writing Groups portrays authority as distributed across peers, since each participant might critique the work of others.

Gere then suggests that peer response entered classrooms through a “progression from literary society to writers’ club to classroom workshop” (15). Writers at the turn of the twentieth century brought the practices they encountered in writers’ clubs into classrooms at places like the University of Iowa, where a creative writing curriculum was taking shape. Eventually, peer response moved beyond the creative writing workshop, as “college instructors brought writing groups into ‘regular’ composition courses” (16). Seen in this light, peer response
began not as a teaching technique but rather as a collaborative effort among writers who responded to each other in a spirit of “friendship and good will and respect” (50). It was only through a kind of institutional osmosis that writing teachers began asking their students to do peer response.

But peer response in school was not the same as writing groups outside of school, according to Gere. The second chapter of Writing Groups traces the history of peer response in nonacademic settings such as self-improvement groups, Lyceums, Chautauquas, and women’s literary clubs. For Gere, these “self-sponsored organizations” were places where “authority originates in individual members who decide to join a group” (50). In contrast, the authority in what she terms “school-sponsored groups” originates “in the instructor who directs students to share their writing with peers” (51). Where self-sponsored groups “incorporate . . . caring, connection, non-rule bound, nonhierarchical characteristics” and give “more emphasis to cooperation than competition,” groups convened by teachers operate instead within a hierarchy that “undercuts the empowerment of individuals common in self-sponsored groups” (50–51). It is clear from these characterizations that the “interfering” of teachers is seen as detrimental to the proper functioning of peer response (51). The ultimate goal for Gere is that students learn to “emulate the giving and accepting of authority characteristic of self-sponsored groups” so that classroom groups “become increasingly similar to their non-school counterparts” (52).

Behind this view of authority and autonomy lies a particular form of social constructivism that was circulating in composition studies in the 1980s, most notably in the work of Kenneth Bruffee. In “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” Bruffee draws on the work of L. S. Vygotsky to develop a model of learning as internalization wherein “reflective thought is public or social conversation internalized” (639). But Bruffee and other compositionists at the time were also under the influence of concepts like Stanley Fish’s “interpretive communities” and Richard Rorty’s “normal discourse.” What resulted from this mélange of theories was a specific view of collaborative learning in which learning occurs best among a “community of status equals” or “peers.” Hierarchical relationships and institutional authority were seen to prevent this type of learning. The primary task for teachers, then, is to put “students in conversation among themselves at as many points . . . as possible” (642). The chapters in Writing Groups on collaborative learning and language development share much in common with Bruffee because they too argue that learning requires “social interactions and intellectual negotiations among peers” (75). Like Bruffee, Gere insists that what any peer response group needs most is the “freedom to create its own language” (93).

Under this view the key ingredient for successful peer response is student autonomy. But in this particular theory of collaborative learning, specific to
composition studies in the 1980s, teacher authority stands in opposition to student autonomy. Peer response groups convened by an instructor, then, cannot achieve the level of autonomy possible in groups convened by peers. Students lose authority over their own writing when they are “convened involuntarily”—that is, by a teacher (4). In the worst instances, such groups are essentially “non-autonomous,” meaning that members of the group respond to each other only because a teacher requires it (51). The best an instructor can do is to create “semi-autonomous” groups that approximate (but cannot equal) the potential of peer-convened groups. In this manner Writing Groups holds out hope for a modest liberation, one in which students respond to each other in isolated pockets of semi-autonomy, even as they are enmeshed in the structures of classroom hierarchy.

This theory of learning has shaped the historical analysis in Writing Groups. By locating the origins of peer response in extracurricular settings like literary societies, writers’ clubs, and self-improvement groups, this history depicts a time when an idealized form of collaboration was fully realized in practice. In this vision of writers coming together spontaneously, of their own free will, to improve their writing without the interference of teachers, Writing Groups represents a kind of golden age of response. And the practical implications of such theory and history are clear: To make peer response work, we must revive, as much as possible, the spirit of self-sponsored groups of the past. History, thus, becomes both supporting evidence for a particular theory of learning and a model for reforming current practices.

This view of authority and autonomy was not only shaped by a specific learning theory but also by widespread attitudes fostered by process pedagogy. In her discussion of the emergence of process-oriented approaches, Sharon Crowley notes that these promoted an “expressivist discourse” that was “produced with the least teacher intervention” (203). This attitude of noninterventionism is evident in other lines of scholarship, such as the literature on teacher response to student writing. Much of that literature worries a great deal about the way written teacher commentary can appropriate or control students’ texts. Though recast in terms of collaborative learning, Bruffee and Gere similarly worry that teacher interference can inhibit or prevent students from learning.

This generalized anxiety extends across and beyond discussions of process pedagogy or collaborative learning theory. It is, to be sure, an expression of an anti-authoritarianism inherited from the 1960s and 1970s. Sometimes this stance manifests itself in deep-seated Romantic or “expressionist” notions of individual authorship and ownership (Berlin 88–89). Writing Groups works explicitly against the privileging of “individual effort” in such frameworks, but its treatment of student autonomy is nevertheless, to borrow from David Bartholomae’s critique of expressivist pedagogies, “an expression of a desire for an institutional
space free from institutional pressures” (64). To some extent collaborative learning theory, as constructed by composition scholars like Bruffee and Gere, replaces the individual authority in expressivism with peer group autonomy while it retains the idea that teacher intervention hinders student learning. In this way durable ideologies of authority and authorship seem to be operating in the view of the past portrayed in Writing Groups, as it implies that peer response was at one time, as it would later be for Peter Elbow, a way of “writing without teachers.”

Of course, teacher authority can be problematic, and Writing Groups justifiably works against the authoritarianism implicit in current-traditional pedagogy. What concerns me, though, is the way the history presented in Writing Groups naturalizes a particular theory of learning. In order to return some responsibility for their own writing to students, Gere has had to greatly limit the scope of teacher agency. Teachers become facilitators or coordinators of peer interaction, staying mostly out of the way. It is a “black box” model of pedagogy, in which teachers set up the initial conditions for peer response, but the actual learning occurs in groups operating (semi)autonomously, without further teacher interference. In another context Neal Lerner speaks of the way “mistrust of authority [has] led compositionists to offer a radically reduced role for the teacher” (200). In order to revise this limiting view of teacher agency, it will be necessary to move beyond the envisioning of an ideal, teacherless context. Instead of writing teachers out of the history of peer response, an alternative genealogy could lead to new understandings of both student and teacher agency in the past, present, and future of response.

**An Alternative Genealogy**

We move, then, from Gere’s account of history to an alternative reading of the emergence of peer response. In constructing this genealogy, I closely examine some of the same primary sources that Gere uses in Writing Groups, both because Gere’s overview of the literature is comprehensive, and also to explore how the same sources can yield different understandings of teacher and student agency. The point of this alternative genealogy is to reconsider the ways these sources construct agency vis-à-vis peer response. What this refiguring of history suggests is that peer response may not have emerged so much out of a move to decenter classroom authority but instead as a way for students to share some of the teacher’s burden.

The earliest reference to peer response among these sources is from an 1880 advice column in the National Journal of Education. In it a composition teacher writes asking for advice about motivating her students. The distraught teacher complains, “I find it very difficult,—yea, almost impossible, to interest [students]
in writing anything that seems to them to be a composition.” The columnist, identified as “Mrs.” A. A. Lord, suggests in response that the teacher first read a story aloud to the whole class, and then ask students to write the story down, presumably from memory. Next, Lord proposes that “after the time allowed for writing has expired, the teacher may call upon one [student] to read what he has written; he reads. Call upon another to correct the first by reading what he has written” (186). This process continues until all students have read their stories, and each has been “corrected.”

Although the annotated bibliography in Writing Groups glosses this activity as one in which “students read their writing aloud and criticize one another,” it is important to make a distinction between criticize and correct—the term that Lord actually uses (126). Lord seems to focus less on critique and more on faithful recall and reproduction. Each composition is meant to follow the model performed by the teacher at the beginning of the exercise, and each student’s composition becomes a tool with which to correct others’ texts. Presumably, this correction has a cumulative effect, such that each student’s reading moves the class closer to the teacher’s original version. The skills exercised here are more recall and recitation than the collaborative peer critique compositionists tend to value today.

In fact, Lord’s activity bears a striking resemblance to the practices of recitation and correction that dominated classrooms in the nineteenth century. In the period before 1860, according to Robert Connors, instructors commonly used “lecture and recitation methods that asked students to take detailed notes of the master’s theoretical lecture one day and spit back his own words to him the next in a detailed catechetical recitation” (45). This practice of recitation also extended to the reading of textbooks. According to Sharon Crowley,

the pedagogy of recitation required that students memorize a few pages assigned from a textbook prior to each days class. During class the instructor called upon them to “recite,” that is, to repeat aloud the assigned section of the text. Sometimes students were required to conjugate verbs or to parse constructions found in the texts they read and memorized. (47)

Whether it was lecture-recitation or textbook-recitation, the basic idea was the same. Students were made to memorize and repeat whatever it was they were expected to learn.

Mrs. Lord’s suggested classroom activity bears more resemblance to this recitation model than it does to the practices of college literary societies. The teacher tells students a story, which functions as a model text the way lectures
and textbooks would have. The students memorize and recall as much of the
detail of the teacher’s story as possible and attempt to reproduce that text faith-
fully. Again, recitation. What is different, perhaps, is that instead of the usual pat-
tern of recitation, in which students perform and teachers correct, Lord’s activity
places some of the responsibility for correction upon other students. It is unclear
from her advice column, however, what rationale lies behind this shift in respon-
sibility. Lord later suggests a kind of class ranking system, so we might speculate
that her system of having students correct each other is meant to foster a produc-
tively competitive spirit, but we cannot be sure. Nevertheless, the basic pattern of
recitation and correction is evident in her advice.

That same pattern is evident in an 1892 article in The School Review, in
which J. G. Wright outlines a plan for the first year of high school English. In his
discussion of “composition,” he encourages teachers to “let the pupils to some
extent, correct one another’s written work, especially after the teacher has criti-
cized as many papers as practicable before the class” (22). This issue of “practi-
cability” is important to Wright because his overall objective is to have students
write as often as possible. By having students do some of the work of correction,
the teacher is no longer responsible for correcting every single piece of student
writing. That focus is on displacing workload, rather than the pedagogical
value of peer response, is made clear when Wright says that “the compositions
the teacher lacks time to read may often be assigned for correction to the most
competent member of the class” (18). With the workload thus redistributed, the
amount of writing each student does can be increased. In this way the traditional
pattern of recitation and correction is preserved while allowing students to produce
more writing than was normally practical.

The connection among recitation, workload, and peer response is even more explicit in an 1894 article titled “An Experiment in Correcting Compositions.” Its
author, William Maxwell, discusses alternatives to what he calls the “usual method” of correcting student themes wherein the student writes a theme, the
teacher marks the theme’s errors, and the student rewrites the theme to correct
those errors. Maxwell finds this “usual method” deplorable, not because it per-
petuates the recitation model but rather because the “reading of compositions in
order to correct error lays an intolerable burden on the already overburdened
grade teacher.” He goes on to describe such reading as a “grind” and “drudgery”
that is “irksome and blighting,” and correction as the activity into which the
“work of the teacher degenerates” (242). Though Maxwell finds this correction
of themes troublesome, he considers it indispensable. He views the “correction of
text” as “essential” to learning how to “speak and write . . . clearly and accu-
ately” (240). Maxwell’s main concern, therefore, is to find a way for “correction
of error” to happen without sentencing teachers to mind-numbing tedium.
In searching for alternatives to this “usual method,” Maxwell considers an activity wherein students write their themes on the blackboard and the teacher critiques the themes in front of the whole class. This activity resembles peer response inasmuch as the teacher in this scenario is supposed to “call the attention of the entire class to the corrections you [the teacher] make in each, frequently appealing to the class for assistance” (243). No pedagogical rationale is given for asking students to provide this “assistance,” no sense that the students derive any tangible benefit from helping the teacher correct other students’ work. Rather, given Maxwell’s negative characterizations of theme correction, it is safe to assume that the purpose of “appealing to the class” is to offload onto students some of the drudgery associated with this task. The same assumptions that underwrite the use of recitation (a term Maxwell applies to this activity) still hold. That is, Maxwell is not looking to change the way students learn how to speak and write; he is only concerned with making the old way of teaching a more humane experience for the teacher.

Ultimately, Maxwell dismisses the usefulness of this activity, partly because it might “humiliate” students to have their work corrected in front of the whole class and partly because it might fail to reduce the teacher’s actual workload—the point of finding a new method in the first place. He claims that correcting themes this way “still calls for considerable burning of the midnight oil on the part of teachers,” which means “many hours of tedious reading and perfunctory use of a blue pencil or red ink” (243). Maxwell neglects to say why such work would still be necessary; possibly he does not trust the ability of students to correct each other. What is clear, though, is that he places little faith in the efficiency of this particular in-class method. In other words, the method lacks merit unless it somehow reduces the teacher’s workload by guaranteeing the efficient correction of student themes by other students.

This theme of efficiency is taken up by Jacob Tressler in a 1912 study of student correction of themes. Tressler outlines a complex arrangement in which each student writes a theme, exchanges themes with one other student, marks up the other student’s theme, discusses those marks in conference with the other student, and passes the theme on to a “class critic” (an advanced student), who also marks the themes. At the end of this involved process, the theme is finally forwarded to the teacher, who “checks up the theme, crosses out unjust criticisms, points out errors not previously detected, and changes the rating of the composition if he [sic] thinks the critic’s grade too high or too low.” Though Tressler provides some modern-sounding rationales for this method (for example, “it is judgment by peers” and “it gives the boy [sic] the ability to detect and correct his own mistakes”), the main point of his study is to determine whether this is an efficient method for correcting themes (406). As Tressler puts it, “student
correction is worthless if it is not efficient” (407). He measures that efficiency by asking whether students can provide the same kind of correction that the teacher would. In the end he decides that they can, and this provides the justification for continued use of student correction of themes, one motivation for which is reducing teacher workload.

In none of these sources are the issues of student autonomy or teacher authority explicitly raised. Rather, they focus on the way teachers can reduce their workloads while maintaining the traditional model of recitation and correction. Recitation was nothing new during this period (its growth as a methodology having occurred between 1820 and 1850, according to Connors), but shifting the burden of correction from teacher to student, even partially, does seem to have surfaced around this time. Why? As the nineteenth century wore on, conditions for composition instructors went from bad to worse, and, according to Connors, “many of the newer colleges were forced to turn to younger and less trained teachers” (77). Maxwell’s 1894 lament over correcting student themes illustrates why Connors calls “composition courses of the latter nineteenth century . . . hells of overwork that drove away all those teachers who were upwardly mobile and ground down those who were not” (189). What I am suggesting is that this decline in the work conditions of composition instructors was a factor in the growing interest in having students correct each other. Looked at in this light, the methods of peer response seem to have been designed to retain a recitation model while relieving some of the pressure that model puts on teachers.

**Rethinking Agency in Peer Response**

On its surface this alternative genealogy—from recitation and correction to overwork to the redistribution of labor in the composition classroom—seems less cheerful than the history offered by *Writing Groups*. The idea that peer response, which has come to be associated in more recent decades with progressive pedagogies, had roots in such practical and conservative motivations, might seem paradoxical or even disappointing. I am *not* suggesting, of course, that today’s writing instructors should revert to the now discredited model of recitation and correction that lurked behind these early discussions. Process pedagogy has had dramatic effects on the way compositionists conceive of the teaching of writing. Teachers today employ peer response at several stages in the writing process, from generating topics to polishing final drafts, and commenting on everything in between. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, the prevailing model of composition pedagogy was not about process, and discussions of peer response at the time reflect this difference. Students, it was understood, learn how to write by being corrected.
I am also not suggesting that peer response had only one origin or that this alternative genealogy is the only way to narrate its emergence in composition classrooms. No doubt many factors contributed to that, including the presence of available models for peer work, such as the various clubs and extracurricular activities described by Gere. The aim here is not to decide which genealogy is “correct” but instead to understand the consequences of telling history in particular ways. According to the alternative genealogy, peer response emerged (at least partly) out of admittedly nonprogressive origins. I want to argue, however, that its introduction into the writing classroom nevertheless represents a dramatic shift in thinking about teacher and student agency. Where the correction of student themes had always been considered the teacher’s job, had indeed been a way for teachers to establish and maintain authority, it was now viewed as an activity in which students could also participate. Whatever we may think today about these early motives for introducing peer response into classrooms, its emergence there marks a significant shift in thinking, a leap of imagination that cast students in a role normally reserved for teachers.

Granted, the task of correction that teachers were now willing to share with students was at the time considered “irksome and blighting.” It might be tempting, therefore, to read these early discussions of peer response as urging teachers to dump this burdensome chore into the laps of students. However, a closer look at these sources reveals a more complex arrangement. In none of these early discussions do teachers completely abdicate their own responsibility for correction. In Lord’s activity a teacher coordinates the activity by calling on students to correct each other. In Wright’s students correct those themes their teacher lacks the time for. In Maxwell’s a teacher asks students for help in correcting themes in class. And in Tressler’s a teacher acts as the final arbiter at the end of the correction process. In each case the redistribution of labor is not simply a transfer of responsibility from teacher to student; rather, the task of theme correction is shared between teachers and students. It is distributed across all members of a writing classroom.

This sharing of labor also entails a redistribution of authority, although in a manner different from the one outlined in Writing Groups. In Gere’s book authority is figured as a finite commodity, a resource that one either does or does not possess. Under this view teacher authority and student autonomy balance each other in a zero-sum game, in which students gain freedom as teachers lose influence. However, we might more profitably think of authority not as something one has, but rather as something one does or enacts in practice. From this perspective authority ceases to be a static quality and becomes instead an index of a person’s capacity to act in a particular sphere of activity. It is through participation in practice that individuals position themselves in relation to one another.
In this way authority takes on the quality of a dynamic, ever-shifting function of agency. By imagining classrooms in which students engaged in the correction of other students, these early discussion of peer response expanded the agency of students while not necessarily limiting the agency of teachers. Peer response represented less a transfer of authority than an extension of agency across the classroom.

At the core of this alternative genealogy, then, is a different way of configuring agency. Instead of a binary distinction between teacher authority and student autonomy, this view of history foregrounds the way peer response reconfigures the participation of students and teachers in the practices of the writing classroom. Learning in this context comes to resemble what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger call “legitimate peripheral participation,” a kind of apprenticeship in which students participate alongside teachers. Instead of being passive recipients of teacher evaluations, students in these examples take an active role in evaluating the work of other students. As Maxwell’s remarks about learning make clear, theme-correction was regarded as the primary means through which students learn how to write. Recitation and correction were the sine qua non of writing instruction. By correcting each other’s themes, students took a hand in furthering this agenda, not just in terms of each student’s own development but also in the way students now participated in the learning of others. Students under this model were no longer simply learners; they were coparticipants with the teacher and other students in the overall aims of writing instruction.

Of course, what constitutes the aims of writing instruction has changed dramatically since the late nineteenth century. Few instructors today (hopefully) still believe that recitation and correction are effective ways to promote the acquisition of written language. What is important in this alternative genealogy, then, is not the recitation/correction model itself but rather the view of learning as coparticipation that it illustrates. From this perspective successful learning does not hinge on the nonparticipation of teachers. In fact, it suggests that collaboration between students and teachers can be a powerful context for learning. When students work alongside teachers, the classroom becomes a kind of Vygotskian “zone of proximal development” in which the learning of those with less experience (the students) takes place in collaboration with a more experienced other (a teacher). Rather than squelching the learning processes of students, such student/teacher collaboration can promote learning through dialogic exchange among all members of a classroom.

At the heart of these two historical analyses are different ways of understanding how learning happens. Gere’s history works against a transmission model of education, in which knowledge and skills are passed on from teacher to student through didactic instruction. *Writing Groups* rejects this model by focusing
on contexts, like literary societies and writer’s clubs, where knowledge is not transmitted from an authority but rather created in autonomous communities. But where the transmission model figures students as blank slates or vessels to be filled with knowledge, the particular model of collaborative learning espoused in *Writing Groups* imagines students as members of a community of status equals in which knowledge is constructed through consensus. Instead of being socialized into the knowledge, skills, and values of their instructors, students are socialized into those of their peers. Students do not need teachers; they just need each other.

While I am sympathetic to its implicit critique of the transmission model, I am nevertheless left uneasy about the way this version of collaborative learning theory swings the pendulum so far in the other direction. As Thomas Newkirk has noted, students and teachers have significantly different ways of understanding what constitutes effective writing. Under this collaborative model taken to its logical extent, students would learn to write only for other students, and they would therefore lack access to the conventions and dispositions of academic writing embodied by their instructors. What the alternative genealogy for peer response suggests, in its vision of teachers and students sharing responsibility in the classroom, is a third way to understand learning processes. Students do not learn *from* teachers or *from* peers, but rather by engaging in the practices of writing and reading alongside both. This is a dialogic view of learning. According to Bakhtin, “the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others’ individual utterances” (89). The aim of education is still socialization, but not in the limiting fashion of transmission or a collaborative learning theory that emphasizes consensus. Where those two other models imply assimilation into existing communities (that is, teachers or peers), this third model of learning highlights the dialogic shaping of an individual’s practices through coparticipation.

Just as Gere’s history of peer response was shaped by theoretical and ideological concerns, so too has this alternative genealogy been shaped. And just as *Writing Groups* ends with a discussion of the practical implications of its history and theory, I would also like to end this essay by showing how this different view of peer response might open up new ways of thinking about practice. In order to do so, I would like to situate my own account of the emergence of peer response in the context of my own teaching and classroom research. That research focuses on a response context in which instructors meet with small groups of students outside of class to discuss drafts of student writing. This kind of instructor-led peer conference, where students collaborate with teachers in giving feedback to other students, is something of a hybrid between student-only peer response groups and student-teacher conferences. Many teachers use this activity in their
writing courses, and yet there has been virtually no scholarly discussion of it in the field. This lack of attention, I believe, stems from the strong distinctions that have been made between the response of peers and the response of teachers.

From the standpoint of the history and theory laid out in Writing Groups, the idea of students and teachers responding to student writing in the same conference seems like an ineffective strategy, because the presence of the teacher would squelch the autonomy essential to peer response. From the perspective of this alternative genealogy, however, instructor-led peer conferencing begins to make sense. While the goals in these conferences are not recitation and correction, they nevertheless revive the possibility that students and teachers can collaborate on a set of common goals—in this case response to student writing. Through this kind of coparticipation, students and teachers encounter each other’s discourses, and they are better positioned to enter into the dialogic exchange through which learning happens. Gere’s history, and the theories and ideologies it reflects, would prevent us from recognizing the potential in a context like instructor-led peer conferences. It is in these ways that historical analysis can enable or constrain practices. What seems ill advised under one framework suddenly becomes viable under another.

But history is only one part of the equation. My own teaching experience and subsequent research have taught me that instructor-led peer conferences are effective and worth further investigation. It is this conviction that students can collaborate successfully with teachers that has led me to push against the limits set by prevailing attitudes toward teacher authority. I do not pretend that authority is unproblematic, either in peer response or instructor-led conferences, but collaborative dialogue between teachers and students offers opportunities for negotiating how that authority is configured. To the extent that the history in Writing Groups empowers students, it disempowers teachers. It leaves composition instructors groaning under the weight of their own authority, unable to act for fear of dominating students. The lessons contained in this alternative genealogy suggest that there are ways of thinking otherwise. In other words, the hope offered by this history is not that we might return to an idealized past but instead that we have the power to shape a future in which both students and teachers learn from their encounters with one another.

Notes

1I thank RR peer reviewers Andrea Lunsford and Duane Roen, who provided valuable and useful feedback on this project. Special thanks go to Peter Mortensen and Paul Prior, who guided me through earlier versions of this piece.

2I use the term peer response to denote any context in which students in a writing course respond to the work of other students. Gere uses the term writing groups to encompass both this activity
and any other extracurricular context in which writers respond to each other. Because this essay focuses on the introduction of peer response into composition classrooms, I employ the more pedagogically oriented term.

Gere’s history has been and continues to be influential in discussions of peer response, such as 2004’s *Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom*, whose editors use Gere’s account of the extracurricular origins of peer response as the “organizing principle” for their book (7). A search of the Arts & Humanities Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index hints at the broad impact of *Writing Groups*. It has been cited at least forty-six times in the journals covered by those indices since its publication in 1987. Of course, this kind of citation history is only an index of general influence and does not elucidate the ways in which a work has been taken up.

Though Gere acknowledges there was some amount of “faculty support and participation” in these literary societies, she is also careful to mention that “on some occasions faculty became too active, leading to student complaints” (11). In this way she minimizes the importance of faculty participation, and even frames it as a problematic threat to the autonomous operation of these groups.

Some subsequent scholarship has also called certain elements of collaborative learning theory into question. Both Joseph Harris and John Trimbur critique this theory’s reliance on an idea of community built around consensus. Gail Stygall has argued that collaborative group work can perpetuate the hierarchy and authority it seeks to replace, especially in terms of gender dynamics.

This idea that learning happens best among “status equals” or “peers” is a departure from Vygotsky, who emphasized the role of either “adult guidance” or “more capable peers” in collaborative problem-solving (*Mind in Society* 86). It is uncertain whether Vygotsky would characterize hierarchy or authority as a necessary hindrance to learning. In general, for Vygotsky, there is usually only one learner in a given collaboration.

For example, see Nancy Sommers’ seminal “Responding to Student Writing” and Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch’s “On Students’ Rights to Their Own Texts.”

See note six, above, on the use of Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development.” My use of Vygotsky’s framework here emphasizes the difference in knowledge or skill of participants implied by the concept.

Interestingly, Gere also presents her view of learning as dialogic, since it involves conversation between writers and their (peer) audience. This is a “horizontal” view of the dialogic. I have understood “dialogic” here as the historical shaping of language practices through dialogic exchange, whether along a student-student axis or a student-teacher axis.

Like individual student-teacher conferences, which also depend on meeting students outside of class, instructor-led peer conferences are time consuming and difficult to manage in contexts with a high teaching load, or large class sizes. See Lerner for a discussion of the way the desire for individualized instruction has historically been at odds with the practical time constraints of many classrooms.

Dene and Gordon Thomas in “The Use of Rogerian Reflection in Small-Group Writing Conferences” do discuss this kind of response context, but they focus on promoting Rogerian responses to student writing from both teachers and students. Susan Miller, in “Using Group Conferences to Respond to Essays in Progress,” offers some strategies for implementing these kinds of conferences.

**Works Cited**


Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980.


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