
Reviewed by Lori B. Baker, Southwest State University

Candace Spigelman's Across Property Lines presents a comparison of the operations and successes of a non-academic writing group and a first-year composition writing group. As one of its bases, the study examines the widely accepted notion that writing groups in classrooms should model the methods that "real" (which is to say successful, working) writers in non-academic groups use. Rather than dredging through differing conceptions of collaborative theory, Spigelman positions herself with references to the theorists with whom she is most closely aligned, and she then offers us a fresh take on classroom collaboration and intellectual property theory. Overall, Spigelman presents a thoughtfully composed, compellingly theorized argument about how these groups operate and why writing instructors should incorporate discussion of intellectual property issues in their courses in order to help facilitate more effective writing groups.

Spigelman endeavors not only to open new ground in collaboration theory but to engage intellectual property theorists by proposing a dialectical relationship between the public and private, which she associates with two often binary schools of thought, social constructionism and expressivism. By applying intellectual property theory to first-year writing, she implies an acceptance of the student writer as a thinking being who is an author, rather than the image of a professional writer or high-brow theorist that many of us tend to picture when we think of intellectual property arguments. While some would argue that viewing a student as an author is an outgrowth of the expressivist movement, others would argue that it is a core social constructionist move that helps to acknowledge the student as a valid voice in the making of meaning. Spigelman uses this common ground—viewing the student as author, despite differences in how one might view "author-ity" (which she also interrogates in the text)—to compare the student group to the non-academic writers' group.

The primary variable for Spigelman's investigation is the concept of textual ownership, which she refers to as a metaphor for intellectual property. Using case-study methodology, Spigelman interrogates how a group of working writers, whom she calls the Franklin group, write either fiction or nonfiction pieces and voluntarily come together once a month to conceive of and act on textual ownership. She then compares this process to that of a group of student writers in a first-year composition course. Her conclusion is that the non-academic writers are more successful because
they are able to temporarily share their texts as public documents, whereas
the students are unable to wholly let go of their notions of text as private
property. She states, “For the Franklin writers, ownership was a dialectical
process, an action, something constantly engaged and negotiated” (128) that
offered writers a way in which to take in ideas from their colleagues while
retaining final decision-making power. The students, however, were an
involuntary group of novices who had less trust in one another and were
constrained by the academy’s notions of authorship as well as an ever-
present wariness of plagiarism. Each student had a slightly different view of
ownership, and the group never overtly explored these differences; this led
to some understood, set limits on what was allowable as collaboration.
Spigelman finds these limits, in which the students relegated themselves to
only surface or topical/example-oriented revisions, to be less effective than
the non-academic group’s collaboration. In her analysis of their work and
interviews, Spigelman found that the Franklin group “invoked discourse of
shared ownership to talk about their contributions to the making of meaning
in their peers’ essays”; the students, on the other hand, “constructed a
discourse that invariably undermined notions of multiple authorship and
refocused on their individually authored and individually owned texts” (85).
Based on her observations and theoretical work, Spigelman concludes the
book with a chapter in which she compares the two groups explicitly and
offers three possible pedagogical approaches for composition teachers to
draw from.

Given my own grounding in collaboration theory, I found
Spigelman’s move to intellectual property theory insightful and
appropriate. The issues of authority and ownership in previous
collaboration theory have either served as tentative explorations or have
been grounded in (and thus slightly blinded by) epistemological
frameworks that allow for only a singular view of collaboration’s purposes
and effects. Spigelman certainly operates from a social constructionist
framework (made clear by statements, at times almost startling, such as
“Despite its enduring popularity, the Romantic myth of the sequestered,
garret-bound author is fiction” [25] or “Clearly, the main purpose of writing
groups is to invite other writers to share in the text by providing responses
that will positively affect the revised manuscript” [46]); however, she also
carefully explicates expressivist theory, and in the end seems to incorporate
both perspectives. As she puts it, “Understanding ownership as dialectical
interaction of the public and private (the social and the individual) may be
useful to the ongoing debate between advocates of expressivist and social
constructionist rhetorics, where notions of ownership are highly contested”
(128). While it is impossible to do justice to her argument here by trying to
replicate it in a condensed form, her conclusion is that “The metaphor of textual ownership seems, finally, to be a necessary, though fictive, component of writing group interaction” (131); it is “fictive” because from a truly social constructionist position, a writer never actually “owns” a text. However, she posits that a writer has to at least feel or pretend that the text is hers at times, and public at other times, in order for the text to be written. Some may feel that Spigelman is trying to have it both ways—attempting to accommodate social constructionists while appeasing the expressivists—but I like that she is trying to account for how, if we are to believe in the postmodern view of multiple subject positions and meaning made through individuals rather than by them, collaboration in writing groups actually takes place. Spigelman strongly believes that if a writing group is to be effective, all members of the group must be willing to share their writing publicly and take responsibility for it. They must feel a sense of ownership, even if that ownership is, in the end, a fiction.

As a teacher of writing, I also like that Spigelman’s explanations of the students’ and professionals’ perspectives on group work account for differences in their epistemological frameworks. She recognizes that “the question of ownership is always equivocal” (132) given the different group members’ potential views. I would add that a teacher’s recognition of her own epistemological stance is equally vital to helping form and inform effective writing groups.

Spigelman supplies thoughtful, fairly full description of the study she conducted and its outcomes. The second chapter of the book is devoted to describing the Franklin writers’ group and the third chapter the student group. She describes each participant in the group and then discusses their views on authorship and intellectual property, interspersed with examples from the groups’ exchanges. Her material comes from observations of the groups, interviews with group members, and in the case of the student group, a videotape of one group session. While the study seems to have followed standard case-study methodology quite closely, I found it a little hard to find explicit details on the study itself, such as at what point the participants were interviewed and whether the questions about their initial views of collaboration and ownership were asked at the beginning, middle, or end of the study (the timing could make a difference in how strongly one agrees or disagrees with her conclusions). Some of the key information about how the study was conducted is relegated to a few endnotes, while other aspects of the study were mentioned in various chapters. While this may be acceptable to those who find the detail about the methodology secondary to the discussion of outcomes, I prefer explicit information gathered in one location. The discussion of participants’ views and actions,
however, is quite thorough, and Spigelman has carefully selected key quotes and examples. She makes it a point to stick to her initial research question. For example, right at the point I began to question whether gender in the groups had any effect on how ownership was being construed, Spigelman speaks to the issue and essentially refuses to go there; she dismisses gender, race, and class as indeterminate variables, based on the small size of her study and a few references to other works. While I wish she would have entertained the idea more, she is right not to engage in speculation when such variables were not a part of the original research. Spigelman is also quite careful to acknowledge the effect her role as researcher may have had in the groups’ operations.

Spigelman ends with a description of three different possible pedagogical “innovations” (112) that instructors of writing might use in their classrooms to help them focus more explicitly on issues of intellectual property. What’s useful about this aspect of the book is that she’s been creative enough to develop three quite different course contents based on different philosophical approaches (textual ownership in “Academic Discourse Pedagogy,” “Expressivist Pedagogy,” and a “Pedagogy of Classical Rhetoric”). Again, rather than impose only her own framework, she has tried to imagine how the concept of intellectual property as it is applied to group work might play out in other types of classrooms. The only problem is that often “teaching is not so clearly demarcated along theoretical lines” (133), and each pedagogy is based on a rather narrow interpretation of that “type” of pedagogy (the academic discourse pedagogy is framed around David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrofsky’s Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, and the expressivist pedagogy draws solely from Peter Elbow). However, there are enough ideas and assignments described that any teacher could easily be inspired by what Spigelman presents here to adapt intellectual property discussions to their own coursework.

Spigelman does a good job anticipating potential arguments and addressing them. The book is well organized in that regard. Hard-liners on either side of the expressivist/social constructionist debate are not likely to agree with her, but for those who find such polar positions stifling, her work opens up new avenues for exploration. While she uses the non-academic writers’ group as a springboard for discussing how groups are used in first year composition, the book provides an equally interesting tale of the five working writers that professional writing theorists might find useful. Spigelman’s study is well grounded in theory, presents a balanced description of both groups, and is useful for both its theorizing and practical applications.