The most productive and memorable semester of my career as a college student came not beneath the florescent glare surrounded by bored faces listening day after day to someone lecture day who would throw out the occasional question to keep the “discussion” going and to keep us awake. No, it came at the round table outside Manoa Gardens, the University of Hawai‘i campus bar, where a group of students would gather before and after class to discuss the day’s reading. Most of the meetings were spontaneous, but occasionally we invited professors to join us to discuss particular works. For a while, we were meeting monthly with Dr. Joe Maltby, in his final semester before retiring, to discuss Shakespeare, twice complementing our “class” with field trips to local productions of the Bard’s work. We all felt like those smiling faces on the covers of college viewbooks: this is what college is meant to be like. It was a magical time. And it was effective: years later I remember line and verse of much of what we discussed, what we agreed upon, and what we argued about, and I can point to two reasons why: everyone who attended was interested and prepared, and everyone who attended contributed just about equally to the conversation.

Preparation and participation as keys to a successful learning experience—that’s certainly no great revelation. But what we found around that table at Manoa Gardens was the opposite of what we found in most of our classes, including some graduate seminars, where students would sit passively as the wisdom of some professor’s take on the reading washed over them.
lucky teacher might wind up with a few students not only prepared but also willing to participate in the discussion. Most of the students, unfortunately, would either say nothing or wait to be “picked on,” and once the talkers emerged, the other students would sit back and rely on the dominating personalities to run the show. On the rare occasions it was issued, most students took the command, “Break into groups,” to mean “Sit back and wait until the last five minutes, when the teacher tells you the important points.” As a student I became frustrated with the overall lack of energy in such classes and with what appeared to be everyone’s reliance on me and a couple of other talkers to keep them off the hook. Looking back now as a teacher, I imagine that most students on the classroom’s fringes—although not all since some students arguably do get more out of careful, serious observation than active participation—got next to nothing from those classes. More troubling is the thought that the social dynamics of those classes conformed to cultural practices inconsistent with those of many of the students and, hence, effectively excluded them from getting as much as they could or should have out of the learning experience.

It might seem obvious that, at the university level, givens like active class participation should not be the problem of the teacher and, therefore, not worthy of much discussion. At this level students should understand that what they get out of the educational experience depends on what they put into it and that the equation goes beyond completing assignments and studying for tests. And if they don’t, it’s easy for us to think, then too bad—I did my job. If they don’t want to engage or if they’re uncomfortable testing their ideas in an open forum, that’s their choice.

Part of the reason my lecture/“discussion” courses failed to come close in either educational or social value to our Manoa Gardens “class”—which was as mixed ethnically and along gender lines as our UH classes, and even included two second-language speakers—was cultural. Certainly some students must have come unprepared to our courses back then because English 417 was just another box to cross off on their way to graduation and staying half-awake in a lecture/“discussion” was enough to get them the passing grades they were after—that is, they were of the consumer culture that has turned college into a degree-earning means to a “good job.” Others, however, came fully prepared and did well on quizzes and were active enough before and after class, but never said a word all semester during class—because, I have since learned, speaking out in a group was considered arrogant in their home cultures or because of other cultural sensitivities having to do with “getting it wrong” in front of twenty or more of their peers or because of some insecurity stemming from the huge gap between their home cultures’ languages (or other Englishes) and American Standard English. The Manoa Gardens “class” somehow eased those concerns.
Since terms like “students of diverse backgrounds” or “multicultural student populations” can lump together students of certain races and then direct assumptions about how such groups ought to be taught, my conception of these terms is worth clarifying. Of the twenty students in my recent English 100 section, four learned English as their second language, and two of those continue to speak languages other than English at home. Several others speak versions of Hawaiian Creole English outside of class. Seven attended top-tier college prep high schools—one in California, the others here in Honolulu. Two are what many scholars would call “mainstream”—from the “dominant culture” and from the Mainland—while another is Hispanic and from the Mainland. The rest are a cross-section of Hawai‘i’s “local” (read, of color) population: Filipino, Japanese, Hawaiian, Chinese, and mixes of these ethnicities. All but five of the total entered my class underprepared, in my judgment, as readers as much as writers. According to their performance on the university’s placement essay test, five of my students—including one from the dominant culture—were designated basic writers and met with an outside tutor twice weekly. The class—a typical representation of all the classes I’ve taught here at UH, save for the absence of Korean, Vietnamese, Hawaii-born Caucasian, and Samoan students—fell clearly under various definitions of “multicultural” or “diverse,” but each student’s culture might be more precisely described according to De and Gregory’s notion of “a heteroglossic pastiche, a complex interplay of class; gender; geographic region; nationality; urban, suburban, or rural affiliation; and major socializing forces like popular culture, politics, and religion” (123)—a notion underscored equally by the presence of the high-achieving Hawaiian student from a neighbor island (read, rural) public high school who never failed to come to our class dressed for the club scene and of the student from the “dominant culture” in the basic writer’s group.

The point here is not that Hawaiian students are to be taught one way and Japanese another, but that nearly everyone in the class, each with her/his own heteroglossic pastiche, came from a space that did not blend easily with Western academic discourse or the primarily Western culture found on a university campus. Composition scholars will recognize this notion—that collaborative classrooms are particularly well-suited for diverse student populations—as part of a conversation stretching back to the work of Kenneth Bruffee, who details in “Collaboration, Conversation, and Reacculturation” and elsewhere his struggles upon being named Brooklyn College’s Director of Freshman English the year after the City University of New York adopted its open admissions policy. Bruffee and his colleagues discussed the work of Paulo Freire and John Dewey in settings very much like my own Manoa Gardens table and concluded that the success of their students depended upon “reacculturation” to university culture and that students could best “reacculturate themselves” to
the university community “by working together,” just as Bruffee and his colleagues were reacculturating themselves to a much different world of teaching than the one in which they had been trained. “Transition groups,” he explains, “provide us with understanding peers on whom we can rely as we go through the risky process of becoming new members of the knowledge communities we are trying to join.” Students are empowered, he says, “as they develop the ability and confidence to exercise the craft of interdependence” (68).

Scholars such as Greg Myers, John Trimbur, and Darin Payne (“Collaborative”) have gone on to point out the dangers of Bruffee’s classroom as a place that winds up ignoring and even trying to eliminate difference, becoming a site of cultural reproduction rather than a place where knowledge is socially constructed and different voices are valued equally. Trimbur, in particular, theorizes a “utopian” form of consensus—a let’s-agree-to-disagree first step towards what he sees as a more valuable “rhetoric of dissensus,” where students will base their collaborative conversations “not on consensus, but on the reciprocity and the mutual recognition of the participants and their differences” (614).

Carrie Shively Leverenz and Darin Payne (“Composition”) confirm the utopian nature of Trimbur’s “heterogeneity without hierarchy” collaborative classroom by showing how hard it is to have students enact his rhetoric of dissensus. Briefly, Payne shows how quickly and easily the fragile concept of knowledge as socially constructed can be crushed by a teacher’s “epistemological authority”—even when the teacher bends over backwards to empower the students towards dissensus. In two mid-nineties ethnographic studies, Leverenz shows us students unwilling to confront one another when sensitive issues arise (“Collaboration”) and how quickly a vocal already-assimilated student can silence the different voices that make up a group we might otherwise assume should perfectly accommodate dissensus (“Peer Response”). Leverenz’s example shows how quickly heteroglossia can become the same old institutional monoglossia.

Teachers of diverse student populations may always struggle with the “difference” Bruffee tried to accommodate and Trimbur wished to celebrate. I’m less interested here in a pedagogy that explicitly asks students to confront and exploit their differences than in one that allows a rhetoric of dissensus to emerge more readily than it can in lecture/“discussion” courses and in the kind of less successful group set-ups Leverenz examined. I am aiming for Trimbur’s “heterotopia of voices”—the admittedly utopian goal of eliminating the hierarchy among a diverse group of voices, of valuing them all equally.

Reaching these goals with diverse student populations depends, according to Au (3, 12), De and Gregory (120), Fishman and McCarthy (126), Bartholomae (qtd. in Fishman and McCarthy 137), and others, on our recogniz-
ing their home cultures either as starting points into the new academic culture or, as Powell puts it, as opportunities for us to “create campus environments that reflect the cultural heterogeneity within and create a learning community where all students are treated with respect and helped to succeed” (109). I want to leave open the question of how to interpret these notions of valuing student language and home culture since the pedagogical approach I offer can be used equally well by those who believe in more assimilative approaches (Bruffee, Hagemann, Kamusikiri), those who believe in encouraging students to resist being colonized by the university, and those who are more ambivalent about students’ adjustment to university culture(s). Still, it’s only fair to state my belief that an assimilative approach misses many important opportunities and that the model I illustrate below aims at the more complex and lasting goal of appropriation of university culture(s) in a way that resonates with Juan C. Guerra’s call “to find ways to help students develop ‘intercultural literacy,’ the ability to consciously and effectively move back and forth among as well as in and out of the discourse communities they belong to or will belong to” (258).

The productively noisy Peter Elbow writing group on which I roughly base my reading group concept can be one way of imagining this sort of student-owned discourse community. As detailed in Writing Without Teachers, Everyone Can Write, Sharing and Responding, and elsewhere, Elbow’s groups are by now an established method of writing instruction that works in several important ways. By drawing attention from the words on the page to the student/writer’s message, the groups emphasize a text’s rhetorical function. By casting the writing process as a social situation, they make writing enjoyable. They improve on less successful student-groups set-up by providing a detailed structure of responding that anyone can follow and by emphasizing the feedback process as a skill meant to improve across the semester. By requiring students to talk about someone else’s writing—an active process, even when it’s not “critical”—the groups make students better writers themselves since the conversations they generate allow students to voice such writerly concerns as the relationship between assertions and evidence. I’ve found Elbow’s method effective in my introductory composition classes mainly because it shows students the immediate value of the fifty minutes they spend in the classroom. Rather than sitting passively or taking turns answering the odd question in a “discussion” or rather than cruising through group work (or the opposite: being the person who always gets stuck doing everything), the students are all working, and the work translates into visible progress.

The Elbow groups also work in several ways that benefit UH’s multicultural student population: their set-up allows for diversity and the kind of “cultural heterogeneity” Powell discusses as a means of empowerment on the
social level, they resonate with certain local cultural practices, and they validate the often non-standard English of student spoken discourse as either an access point into academic discourse (Kamusikiri, Hagemann) or an academic discourse in itself (De and Gregory). The “bridge” that shows up in Hagemann’s title, “A Bridge from Home to School,” is a metaphor based on the experience many of us have with powerful spoken student rhetoric that fails to show up in their written discourse—the fact that students of diverse backgrounds often have little trouble telling us in conferences what they meant to write (Fishman and McCarthy [138] and Shaughnessy [172-177], among others). Laura Gray-Rosendale points to Elbovian writing groups as places to build on this kind of “oral dexterity” (4) for the basic writers she discusses since the groups cause the writing to become “part of the ongoing conversation” rather than some isolated three-page document lacking in real-life purpose (14). The point here is not whether the groups work to decolonize the classroom or to build a bridge, but that valuing student spoken discourse makes particular pedagogical sense for students raised in languages/Englishes other than American Standard English because doing so allows them to start from a position of competence, if not strength.

The Elbovian/Manoa Gardens kind of reading group I detail below addresses what I saw as the shortcomings of lecturing on or “discussing” a reading assignment with the handful of eager students among a much larger group and of the chancy nature of the student-centered classrooms in which I’ve studied. First, I want to get everyone to do the reading—not a given in the lecture class. I also want to get everyone to participate as much as possible—“everyone” including the shy student, the student less familiar with reading critically, the student from the cultural background where heated discussion may seem rude or otherwise inappropriate, and the student perhaps embarrassed by the fact that s/he speaks a language other than American Standard English. I want to make students more engaged readers by elevating the importance of student-produced rhetoric. Like Elbow, I want to encourage the discussion to deepen in complexity across the semester, to move from the specifics of a given essay into cultural criticism and/or conceptual areas where students can begin to make sense of their own lives. At some point I want them to depart from the discussion of a reading assignment’s content to critique the actions/choices of the writer. I want to give students of diverse backgrounds the confidence to begin to participate—on their own terms—in other academic discourse communities, including, perhaps, the lecture/“discussion” communities they encounter in other classrooms. And, of course, I want discussion to be an effective, high-retention learning tool and for students to see it as an effective learning tool that leaves them with more than three credits and a research paper.
Ultimately, I want students to be able to recognize the dialogic potential of their conversations as places where each of their distinct voices contributes to the creation of meaning—that the point is not to convince everyone to agree with you, but to exploit an argument’s potential to explore and to create. The goal resonates with Darin Payne’s notion of the collaborative classroom as a “heteroglossic environment” much different from the Bruffee classroom of consensus. Drawing from Myers’s and Trimbur’s critiques of Bruffee, Payne aims for a classroom “that sees students not just working together to solve and explore problems, but doing so within conditions that encourage dialogic interactions in a Bakhtinian sense” (“Collaborative Learning”). In her ethnographic study of an introductory composition class Peter Elbow taught when he was the visiting Citizen’s Chair here at UH, Kathy Cassity defines the Elbow classroom in similar terms, just as she argues for the appropriateness of Elbow’s “voice-centered” as opposed to “textually centered” pedagogy for the same student population I teach:

Elbow works toward authorizing more voices and more linguistic registers (such as Hawai‘i Creole English), a move that challenges elitist notions of authorship. The space Elbow makes for students’ home languages, multiple linguistic registers, and discursive alternatives can be conceived in Bakhtinian terms as encouraging both centripetal, unifying forces of standard English and the centrifugal, disruptive forces of heteroglossia…. For writing students, encouraging the discovery of their voice(s) helps them develop the power to enter into society’s conversations, moving among the full range of multiple voices and linguistic registers available to them, “taking the word and making it [their] own.” (135, 139)

This idea of embracing the contraries of such “unifying” and “disruptive” forces is right in step with Trimbur’s heterotopia as well as Guerra’s notion of intercultural literacy: rather than assimilate or reacculturate, students are empowering themselves to operate in a variety of discourse communities, beginning with the one they take a hand in creating—their peer response group.

“Dialogic interactions in the Bakhtinian sense” are what happened around our table at Manoa Gardens—because we had made the table ours, because of the pub’s location on the margin of the land of academic discourse, and because of the extreme heteroglossic and temporal nature of any extended conversation where the beer is cheap. It also happened, admittedly, because we all showed up voluntarily—a difference between my own utopian vision and the reality of a required class for eighteen-year-olds. I am requiring my students to come to class, to have done the reading, to have prepared for the
discussion, and to actively participate—often in ways at odds with their home cultures. As I explain below, however, such requirements paradoxically aim at allowing freedom and student ownership over the discussion and at making spaces for the “multiple voices and linguistic registers” Cassity saw in Elbow’s UH classroom. For our purposes here, the relationship between the heteroglossic environment Payne and Elbow are after and what works best for students of diverse backgrounds is clear: it’s easier and more productive—not to mention fairer—to help them make this place theirs than struggle to make them this place’s (see also Halasek [9] on “challenging monologism”; Milanes [194] on “the potential of difference”).

The Model

When I hear teachers talk about “good” classes, the evaluation usually comes down to how willing the students are to speak up. A “good” class has a few interested students who keep the discussion moving; a “bad” class is one in which the teacher winds up lecturing the whole time. In many “discussion” classes, students sit silent either because they’re not prepared, they haven’t made an effort to take interest in the material, they are uncomfortable talking in front of large groups, or they simply don’t know how to participate actively—that is, they don’t talk because they don’t know what is appropriate to say. A student-centered model can address all of these problems, first by creating a comfortable space for discussion, then by offering some direction as to how to behave in the discussion, and finally, by piquing interest in the material and encouraging adequate preparation through the presence of an interested and prepared audience.

While “the practice of breaking into groups” addresses the first of these concerns and is nothing new, it fails to adequately address the rest of these problems since the “good” students usually wind up dominating the small-group discussions and the uninterested/unprepared and uncertain students rely on the inevitable large-group follow-up to get the important points needed for the test from the teacher. Further, as Wendy Hesford points out, the small-group setting is not necessarily a “safe space” for students of diverse backgrounds since cultural differences between the group members themselves can silence such students (32), a point Trimbur acknowledges with the term “heterotopia” (614) and which Kay Halasek echoes in her reminder that the peer group is never composed of equals but is, in fact, “an ideologically driven, hierarchically structured entity” (39). So it is vital to set up the groups in a way that, as much as possible, ensures equal participation.

For a small-group reading discussion to work to its maximum potential, students need to see it as a rhetorical situation, one in which they are fully aware of both the presence of a real, informed audience and of their responsibility to
that audience—a scary thought to some at first but one that winds up empowering even the quietest students by giving them equal access to the conversation. The best way to show them that they’re in a real live rhetorical situation is to give each of them a specific role prior to assigning the reading, instruct them as to how their audience will expect them to behave in that role, show them how to prepare for the discussion, and then raise the stakes by giving the group full responsibility to run the entire discussion—that is, do not invite anyone to cruise through the discussion by giving them a large-group summary of the important points during the last fifteen minutes of class. This idea of assigning roles does not simply solve Hesford’s or Halasek’s concerns, but it does even things out by ensuring that the loud guy lets everyone else in, by holding the slacker responsible to produce, and by making the shy person’s contribution invaluable. I finesse the dynamic further with large-group discussion on the self-assessments students periodically turn in evaluating their performance as group members (see appended examples).

Introducing students to the Reading Group takes an entire class period. First I try to sell the students on the merits of these small groups, and then I instruct them on exactly how to prepare and participate. I begin with a five-minute story on my Manoa Gardens reading group, underscoring the fact that it was as fun as it was instructive, admittedly in part because we met in a bar instead of a classroom but mostly because we had a diverse group of interested, prepared people. We then practice the whole process as follows:

1. Go over each group member’s role in detail.
2. Break into groups and give group members ten minutes to get to know each other. (See Elbow on the social dynamics of writing groups in Sharing and Responding.)
3. Assign roles.
4. Have students read a short essay from the perspective of their assigned role.
5. Give students ten minutes to prepare silently for the discussion according to their role’s requirement.
6. Set them free on their discussion, emphasizing the fact that they are not just taking turns, but that the discussion should be conversational. That is, in addition to your own role’s requirements, you are welcome to act outside of your role in responding to others as the discussion unfolds.
7. Evaluate the experience (NOT the text) as a large group.

Students are to keep their assigned roles to prepare for the first real reading assignment and then rotate for succeeding assignments. It’s important here
to underscore for the students the fact that the first in-class experience was a simulation, not the real thing and that they are to read the assigned reading far more carefully and spend far more than ten minutes preparing for the discussion.

Whenever I talk about this classroom set-up, the first two questions that arise are about how I form the groups and whether or not I change them at any point. The answer to the first question is that I tell the students to get into groups of four and that these will be their reading groups until further notice, perhaps until the end of the semester. To this point the diverse demographic in which I teach has meant that the groups always end up as well integrated along racial and gender lines as I would have made them myself. In other demographics, though, I'd probably go about it the same way since I'm wary of essentializing racial and gender identities and also because allowing the students to choose gives them at least a little bit of the kind of ownership and responsibility with which I hope they end up. As far as changing the groups, there is no right answer. You want students to develop a commitment to each other, but then some people are more compelled to bring their best to a group of strangers than to what become forgiving friends.

During the group role instruction class, I give students the following as a handout with roles based on Literature Circles by Harvey Daniels, two of which—the Discussion Director and the Passage Master—I've borrowed directly from Daniels (107-22). The point is that each person has a particular job that values him/her and a responsibility s/he cannot pass on to stronger or more eager group members.

**Reading Group Roles: ENG 100/101**

**DISCUSSION DIRECTOR**

You are the leader of your group, so it is your responsibility to begin the discussion and to keep it moving and focused on the reading for the entire class period. Begin by assigning the roles for next time. Then elicit a brief summary of the assigned reading. Be prepared with a list of questions to get the most out of your discussion. Most of your questions should get into deeper issues than “what happened,” such as issues relating to place or time period, culture, politics, and other influences on the events/people being written about. It might help if you break your list into categories: one for questions that discuss the work on a concrete “what happened” level and one for more complex questions dealing with the social and cultural implications of the
piece(s). You must turn in your list of questions at the end of class. If the conversation falls flat, you are responsible.

PASSAGE MASTER
It’s okay to enjoy reading. In fact, in this class, it’s encouraged. Your job is to pick two passages from the assigned reading, explain why you chose these particular passages, and then read them aloud to your group. Were they funny? Sad? Did they present particularly vivid images? Did they echo particularly well what the writer was getting at in the rest of the work? Did they remind you of some other image/person/issue/message from something else we’ve read? Be specific. You must also turn in the page and line numbers of your passages and your reasons for choosing them.

PARAGRAPH EXPERT
Your job is to identify certain paragraphs in the assigned reading as being particularly “good” paragraphs. Your definition of “good” must be very specific. For instance, is the paragraph particularly well focused on a single point? Can you identify a clear topic sentence that acts as the paragraph’s thesis statement? What kind of paragraph is it? A narrative? A definition? An argument? A description? A comparison? etc. (See pp. 23-37 in your handbook on “paragraphs.”) You must turn in a paper with the page and line numbers of at least two paragraphs along with explanations as to why you chose those particular paragraphs.

WRITER
Your job is to imagine yourself as the writer of the assigned reading and identify at least four “writerly” choices you made in writing the piece. The choices you imagine can deal with paragraph structure, length, image choices in the intro and elsewhere throughout the piece, use of quoted speech and other placement of evidence, word choice, transitional phrases, and so on. At least one of the choices you identify must deal with a research choice (such as whether or not the writer interviewed someone or used some other outside source or went someplace to make direct observations and, if so, why?). You must turn in line numbers of the writer’s choices you’ve decided to discuss and a brief explanation as to WHY you feel the writer made these choices in each of the FOUR cases.
While these relatively non-critical roles can result in the kind of cultural reproduction that concerns Payne, Trimbur, and others, they are only introductory roles, used in a way that resonates with Halasek’s discussion of the relationship between Bakhtin’s notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses to teach students to read actively (124). Robert Scholes’s call for readers to read “sympathetically” before they read “critically” (118) might clarify this relationship for students. Initially, I’m doing all I can to raise interest among students in reading and in what writers do. Composition teachers can imagine a time later in the semester, once the group’s social dynamic is established, when the groups might contain a Critic instead of a Writer, when the Passage Master points out troubling passages, when the Paragraph Expert finds “bad” paragraphs, or when the group contains a Rhetorical Analyst or a Doubter and a Believer—all of which aim more actively for a rhetoric of dissensus. And, of course, as I explain in introducing the roles to the students, this activity is meant to be a conversation not “taking turns,” and the role requirements are meant to facilitate that conversation—not confine people to certain tasks. If someone answers a Director’s question, someone else ought to respond. If someone reads a Passage, someone else ought to respond. The Director isn’t the only one who can ask questions; the Paragraph Expert isn’t the only one who can talk about paragraphs, and so on. And the only wrong answer is “I don’t know.” “I don’t know, but I think. . . . How about you? Maybe it’s on page 6. Any ideas?” is the way to say “I don’t know.”

A Middle-Stakes Rhetorical Situation

Within the social context of this kind of small group, issues like lack of student interest, preparation, or knowledge as to how to behave or what to say become non-issues, mostly because the small group discussion is so obviously a rhetorical situation. Each student goes home and does the reading knowing that s/he has to prepare in a certain way to speak before an informed and interested audience of three other people and to persuade that audience that s/he did the reading and has prepared sufficiently to have something of interest to say. Once students begin to feel a kind of responsibility to the group, preparation and participation become socially driven instead of mere class requirements they have to fulfill to meet a teacher’s expectation. (While they begin as “required by the teacher,” the Group Role notes each student turns in at the end of class fall into a non-evaluative assessment zone, collected in each student’s developmental portfolio to emphasize that they “count” even though they aren’t graded in any way. The hope is that students will see the connection between comprehensive preparation and a valuable conversation rather than write their prep notes in the service of a grade.) Furthermore, the teacher’s task of performing in order to draw students into the conversation...
becomes unnecessary: remaining silent in this kind of rhetorical situation is socially not an option for any student in the class. And finally, with regard to the larger goal of situating students of diverse backgrounds in the classroom, everyone has a relatively safe space to participate in the conversation, thanks equally to the kind of confidence the required preparation can engender and to the relatively low-risk situation of talking with an audience of three rather than addressing an audience of twenty.

While we can call the group discussion situation “low-risk,” we cannot call it “no-risk” since it, indeed, makes certain real demands of each student—demands aimed at motivating them to assert a kind of agency within the context of the small group discussion when they might normally have been content to sit on the sidelines. In defining particular discussion roles, we are, in effect, calling each student an orator and piling on all the pressure of performing that role in front of an informed audience. And no audience is more real than one sitting inches away that has the chance to question and respond immediately to what the orator has to say. It is here where the social pressure to participate does its job. Cicero demanded that the orator “know the facts” in order to be at his persuasive best (297). Here the student orator must know the facts—that is, come to class prepared—not only to persuade, but also for two readily apparent social reasons having nothing to do with her/his grade or with getting found out by the teacher: the unprepared student looks foolish, and s/he looks like s/he let the other group members down.

While getting everyone to do their homework and then to say something in class is the initial goal of this method, ultimately we’re aiming for a much higher level of engagement and discussion—a gradual, Platonic raising-of-the-stakes that depends on development of each orator’s “character” as defined by Cicero, Quintillian, and Aristotle, who all see the orator’s “good” moral “character” as an essential persuasive tool to, as Aristotle puts it, “inspire confidence in the speaker” (213). For our purposes here, we can adapt the idea of “character” to mean a certain level of inquisitiveness evident in the quality of the student’s preparation: a student of good “character” will, with some encouragement from the teacher, think in these Platonic terms of raising the stakes, and evidence of this thinking will be clear to her/his audience in the form of the quality of discussion and in the evidence of preparation in the form of detailed notes, underlined passages, and so on. Students who initially lack this kind of character will, through the social dynamics of the group, learn its importance soon enough: “You didn’t spend nearly as much time preparing as we did, and now you expect us to explain it all to you—you do not inspire confidence.” As the overall level of preparedness rises within the group, ideally, some kind of commitment to the group will also rise: “These people are helping me to understand the reading because they are putting effort into it, so
I owe them that same effort in return, and together we can begin to do more than just figure out what and how the writer is arguing; we can uncover all the possible truths there in the text.” Students I’ve taught have overwhelmingly bought into this idea of considering effort, rather than ability, when holding fellow group members to a kind of standard.

One further way to encourage this kind of Platonic raising of stakes is to use the social dynamic of the group in a different way: as students become more adept at handling their roles and coming up with opinions they can back up with solid textual evidence, the teacher might begin to encourage a spirit of disagreement within the groups—to start an argument in a way that resonates with Myers’s wish to emphasize conflict (169) and Trimbur’s rhetoric of dis-sensus. Instead of just putting their opinions out on the table, students will begin to sharpen their comments and defend them and then to persuade the group to wind up agreeing or to fail to do so. The rhetorical situation shifts, then, from the more exploratory Aristotelian model to a Bakhtinian definition of meaning: it is socially constructed by the interaction of everyone in the group. “The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience,” Bakhtin says, “is not within but outside—in the social milieu surrounding the individual being” (1220). While on one level this statement comments on the whole group experience (the student orator’s preparation and comments are functions of the material and of his/her membership in the group), we can adapt it here to take the search for Aristotelian possible truths a step further: the text does have a meaning and that meaning is constructed by the outcome of the particular group’s discussion situated at that particular moment in time. “Meaning,” Bakhtin goes on to say, “belongs to a word in its position between speakers; that is, meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener produced via the material of a particular sound complex” (1226). The text’s meaning exists, on one level, between the author (speaker) and the reader (listener) and, on another, somewhere at the center of the four heads that make up the group (the dialectic and, in this case, reflexive orator/audience relationship). Insisting that this kind of meaning exists ends up creating a kind of tension within the group that causes members to make assertions and then defend them—acts we find at the very center of the best close readings and oral versions of the kind of argumentative discourse we’re expecting them to write.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TEACHER?

Very early in the semester students come to see audience pressure as motivation to prepare and engage. But the goal here isn’t to scare them into doing their homework and talking in class, but rather to get them to see the
intrinsic value of the preparation and engagement as keys to making the group experience “work” for them—both as something fun and as an effective learning experience. The fact that the group work is fun is apparent from the start, particularly in the 7:30 a.m. class that I usually teach: this sure beats listening to the teacher and a few outspoken students talk for fifty minutes. But we still have to ask whether or not the students, in fact, see the group experience taking them to higher levels.

If there is any role for the teacher in all of this, it lies in ensuring a positive answer to this question. For beyond the initial detailed set-up of this system, the teacher appears to do little more than tell the class to find their groups and begin their discussions every morning. The teacher does not join any of the groups since her/his presence can ruin the dynamic. And the teacher does not convene the class as a whole with, say, fifteen minutes to go to make sure everyone “got” all the “important points.” Instead, the teacher’s main purpose is to emphasize the group analysis as a skill new to students and continually challenge them to improve that skill. As the semester progresses, everyone should expect the conversation to become more analytical—that shift to the Bakhtinian rhetorical situation that encourages assertions and defenses as it values each voice in the group. This move into analytical territory is the key to showing students that the process is, in fact, working and even working on a very practical level that engages the careerist students who concern Durst, and Fishman and McCarthy: it’s generating thesis statements for their papers.

While it’s difficult to actually prove my assertion that engaging in lots of spoken arguments facilitates one’s ability to write arguments, I have seen other important connections between the reading groups and student writing in my introductory composition class—a place where student writing doesn’t necessarily even engage the reading assignments directly. Students read from a variety of genres ranging from profile essays to editorial-type pieces to research papers written by former students. My goal is that they come to recognize and then criticize various rhetorical strategies, types of presentation, voices, research techniques, paragraph structures, word choices, and so on. Since I introduced the Paragraph Expert and Writer roles three semesters ago, discussions have moved from being content-based (which is easier and often more interesting to students) into this writerly area (which is more useful for my purposes in composition courses).

It’s a bit easier to see how the reading groups work when students engage reading assignments directly in their writing, as they do in other composition classes and as they do in my American literature class, where I use the reading groups exclusively. Literature students repeatedly tell me in conferences of ideas that “came up” in their reading groups, while understanding the dialogic nature of the groups to the extent that they see such
ideas as fair game to appropriate for their own arguments without having to footnote a classmate. One such idea turned into a paper centered on the thesis “Hemingway, Chopin, and Cather all write about female characters that may be viewed as acting selfishly or immorally, but I believe that these women are acting in defiance of the traditional role of women.” The student backs up this very personal assertion with detailed analysis of marriage in the 19th and early 20th centuries as depicted by the three authors and discusses how three female characters rebel against what she calls a “confining” institution women were forced to enter for economic reasons. Both the assertion and her evidence came directly from her reading group’s discussions—particularly from conversation generated by her group’s Connector (who helps put the various authors into context with one another) and its Feminist Literary Critic—resulting in an essay Kathy Cassity might call “voice-centered” (“I believe”) rather than textually centered. One might imagine this student’s group beginning with what-was-the-story-about questions on Hemingway and then moving through what-was-he-trying-to-say, through what-do-you-think-it-means, and then adding Chopin and Cather to the dialogic interaction in ensuing classes. This student decided that what mattered in the conversation was its critique of the institution of marriage. The other group members chose entirely different subjects for the Hemingway/Chopin/Cather paper.

It would be wrong to assume that the teacher can just assign roles, set this thing in motion, sit back and relax, and get this kind of result. I make daily observations on the quality of discussion—ones that do not assert “important points” authority over the material—such as, “Group A’s conversation went far beyond the content, analyzing research choices” or other rhetorical strategies I mention specifically. I interrupt groups from time to time (without sitting to join them), not to “teach” the material, but to teach how to ask follow-up questions or how to refer more often to specific passages. I evaluate the process as a large group whenever possible, occasionally distributing copies of questions generated by Discussion Directors, both good and bad, and taking some time to analyze the questions as a class. I always answer the question, “Is this what you’re looking for?” with the question, “Is it what you’re looking for? Did it help you and/or your group?” As often as possible I try to tie paper success publicly to the quality of engagement within groups. From time to time I have short conferences at the end of class with the next day’s Discussion Directors to offer some guidance without giving too much away or asserting too much authority. I’m also “pushy,” as Elbow describes himself to Kathy Cassity (137)—a kind of manager more than a teacher, one who asserts authority not over the material, but who works to ensure everyone has done her/his job.

Criticism of Peter Elbow’s writing groups often comes from those who complain that students don’t know enough about writing to give adequate

64 Composition Studies
feedback on each other’s papers, and it raises the question here as to whether students get all they need out of, say, an essay ripe for rhetorical/discursive analysis when they’re left on their own—reading, as Elbow might put it, without teachers. In an introductory composition class, I’m less interested in doing a thorough rhetorical analysis of a particular essay than in letting students do a less adequate analysis themselves as a way to acquire the skill. Further, even skilled questioning to elicit the student responses we’re looking for more often than not becomes what Payne calls a “guess what we know” form of inquiry that leads, as he argues, only to more bank deposits while doing real damage to the notion that knowledge is socially constructed (“Composition” 624). To trump the value of the very discourse community a student helped to create by lecturing on what is “important” at the end of class may make teachers feel good about having “covered the material,” but it also undoes all we’ve accomplished in turning the classroom from the site owned by the dominant culture into a contact zone—what Pratt calls a social space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power . . .” (34). If we want students to value their own discourse communities as places where knowledge is constructed and value their unique places in those communities, then we ought to value them ourselves. A good way to do so is to keep our mouths shut.

This is certainly a scary thought—one which left me staring at the ceiling night after night the first couple of times I surrendered my epistemological authority in this way. Are they getting the material? Are they completely wrong? And what do I do with the kind of “unsolicited oppositional discourse,” including hate speech, that Richard E. Miller encountered in explaining that sites of grappling are by nature uncomfortable and potentially dangerous (402)?

Ensuring the class works depends on how the teacher discusses, and the large group evaluates, the whole process. In evaluating as a whole class a student’s list of Discussion Director questions, for instance, the teacher can get students to see for themselves anything they missed in a particular writer’s argument—hopefully without a guess-what-I-know line of questioning. As everyone comes to some kind of agreement on what kind of discussion a “good” question generates—a kind of consensus that’s reachable without compromising the Director’s freedom or messing with the class’s heteroglossic dynamic—the notion of socially constructed meaning is, if not celebrated, at least kept alive. Miller’s more difficult concerns regarding the potential dangers of this free environment deserve more time than I’m giving them here, but for now I’ll say that to this point, the classroom’s overtly rhetorical nature has made it a natural place to take advantage of troubling opinions and radical misreadings as teaching moments, mostly because of the emphasis we put on things like the speaker-audience relationship and the discursive situation.
Consensus?

Maybe it’s ironic for me to conclude with the fact that my students have, in fact, reached a consensus of sorts. While on paper the workload difference between my class and other classes only amounts to the single page of discussion prep notes each student must turn in (some examples of which I’ve appended here), in practice my students must work much harder than someone in a lecture class or a less-structured group setting who can get by without doing any of the assigned reading. No one comes to my class without being prepared for what amounts to a low-stakes oral exam. But despite the paces I’ve put them through, their responses over the last six semesters I’ve been teaching this way have been overwhelmingly positive—on official anonymous four-choice course evaluations, for instance, 146 out of 151 students over this period chose either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” and invariably pointed to the student-centered nature of the class as the reason why. Two springs ago, several of my American literature students responded anonymously to a draft of this paper. Here’s a sample of those student voices:

• “Sometimes there’s so much to be said that you want to butt in on what someone else says.”
• “It helps students get over the idea that only one possible answer exists and therefore be more willing to explore unpopular interpretations of the text.”
• “It also takes time. Sometimes too much time could be spent discussing something of minor detail rather than something more important. How do we prevent this from happening? You don’t want students going in the wrong direction throughout the entire class period.”
• “There is a sense of obligation for one’s classmates that keeps student attendance at a maximum. I’ve readjusted my study habits unconsciously and only now recognize the class effectiveness. My experience in this class has been extremely positive. I enjoy coming to class, am more motivated, receive various interpretations of the selections, and feel compelled to dig deeper in thought. I wish other classes (i.e. social sciences) would consider replicating this style of learning.”
• “You assigning roles for each person has taught me the value of reading. It’s like you teaching us how to fish and feed us for life rather than giving us fish and feeding us today.”
• “One critique of social consequence: we are forgiving and understanding people, so compliance is not always a given in a rhetorical group situation. We are willing to let people slide. But for the most part, the stimulus is always there on some level despite the forgiving qualities of human nature… I definitely noticed the value in letting
people speak and the effect verbal discussion has on the attainment of knowledge or understanding of subject matter. I study and speak Spanish and have learned over the years how important verbal channels are for the capacity to store and reuse knowledge."

Positive student responses such as these come in no small part thanks to the way this pedagogy addresses cultural issues such as Halasek’s concern with hierarchy within groups, the uneasiness with consensus as a form of cultural reproduction expressed by Myers, Trimbur, and Payne, and Au’s call for “culturally responsive” discussion forms—in this case according to “the interactional rules for talk story, a Hawaiian community speech event,” and the local tradition of sibling caretaking as an argument for collaborative learning (8-9).

While only one student has ever specifically cited the group work as the reason for being “dissatisfied” with my class, I do know that I have not yet achieved the kind of classroom-wide heterotopia I found around the table at Manoa Gardens. But students who come to enjoy my classes and noisily succeed in them do so for the same reasons my friends and I took each other to higher levels at Manoa Gardens: they feel like what they have to say is important, they feel comfortable saying it, and, as many of them have stated on official course evaluations, they value (invariably using the word) the “different” voices that make up their group. I may not be able to serve beer in my classes, but I can create an environment where a high percentage of students of diverse backgrounds do not simply tolerate each other but come to see heteroglossia as an important component in their construction of knowledge.

Oahu, Hawaii

Appendix

**DISCUSSION DIRECTOR:**

1. What do you think of Swift’s proposal?
2. How does he begin his satire?
3. Do you think he organized it and thought it out well?
4. What does he do at the end that makes his argument unusual? Is this something you’d do?
5. Swift talks a lot about the problems, but also the solutions. Is there a balance? Or is it one-sided?
6. Why would arguments of this kind work? Are they scare tactics?
7. Thinking of your audience, how would you want them to feel after
reading your paper? Which argument did that the best of the ones we read? Why?

PASSAGE MASTER:

“Last page, second column, from Swift. I didn’t really understand the position he was holding and the message he was trying to get across until I read this part. The language of the article was very confusing. I chose this passage because it’s the only one I could really understand. I finally got to hear his real thoughts on the subject.”

PARAGRAPH EXPERT:

“I thought paragraph four on page 48 (lines 88-101) was a “good” paragraph. It is a narrative paragraph with a clear topic sentence. Its use of quotes adds to its credibility. For example, ‘I know the W.W.F. has caught wind of Pee Dee Dubya’ shows his character and what he’s like. It also gives you a better picture of what is happening.”

WRITER:

“Page 74, column 3, lines 23-38. I thought the entire paragraph was a good writerly choice because it describes the events taking place thoroughly and, at the same time, it gives validity to the author since it’s describing his interview. The interview as a research choice was very good because it helped capture Karp’s character.”

READING GROUP SELF-ASSESSMENT EXCERPTS:

“One person in our group gets us going by adding humor to the discussion—whether he’s leading the group or not. This generates the conversation to flow and move along smoothly because everyone is awake and actively participating.”

“Right now I do put in my two cents’ worth when I’m asked a question, but I could probably add a little more to the discussion when I’m not asked.”

“Our Director used our answers to his questions as the basis of his next questions as well.”
“Our Paragraph Expert did a good job because she gave specific reasons for supporting why the paragraphs were effective. An improvement could be for her to express her opinions more, but over time I think she will improve, as we will.”

“She has strong opinions on things, but always says them in a way that doesn’t criticize anyone else’s ideas (except maybe the author’s—but I agree with that one).”

“Sometimes our Paragraph Master has a tendency to introduce her choice and not elaborate more than a sentence or two. I wish she would’ve talked about them more.”

“I know that I have to work more at finding a way to have the discussion go further than just focusing on the same story. I know that we need to go more in-depth on the authors’ writing techniques and comparing their effectiveness.”

“I need to be alive more and have more energy. I know it’s hard, but somehow I have to get my brain going early in the mornings. I also want to allow my other group members to feel at ease and not have to worry about saying something stupid. I think we’re coming along really well and starting to get to know each other so there’s more of an easygoing feel now that helps during discussions.”

“He also related all the past readings and compared them to the reading we just read. By doing this, he opened up the discussions about how each individual writer approaches their subject. This allowed us to see how we would attempt to focus on our future papers.”

“Although our Director did an excellent job, I thought that, no matter how boring, concentrating more on the writing itself (not the content) would have helped us with our own writing more.”

“I think I have been too quiet in our group. I have been trying to participate more, but sometimes I’m just too shy.”

“I could be better prepared with more points to back up my argument.”

“I believe he is not only a good speaker and Director, but also a good listener. It always helps our discussions… He kept watching the person who was talking, which can inspire the speaker.”
“My own performance was okay. Like everyone else, I think that I had good questions about the content, but didn’t do as well on the writerly questions. For next time I will try to come up with better writerly questions so that we will all become better writers.”

“Our Paragraph Expert used A Writer’s Reference to learn more about types of paragraphs, and the information he shared with us was very important.”

“He feels that as long as we’re spending the class period analyzing an article, we might as well make the most of it.”

“I need to be more serious.”

“I could be more outgoing and assertive.”

“I am really amazed at out ability to keep on task. I don’t think that there has been a reading group session where our group finished the discussion before time was up.”

“There’s usually more to say except I’m scared of getting the information jumbled up. . . . I usually don’t talk to people I don’t know.”

**Works Cited**


De, Esha Niyogi, and Donna Uthus Gregory. “Decolonizing the Classroom: Freshman Composition in a Multicultural Setting.” Severino, Guerra, and Butler. 118-32.


Guerra, Juan C. “The Place of Intercultural Literacy in the Writing Classroom.” Severino, Guerra, and Butler 248-60.


---. “Writing Identities: The Essence of Difference in Multicultural Classrooms.” Severino, Guerra, and Butler 133-49.


