
Reviewed by Kurt Schick, James Madison University

Editors Moss, Highberg, and Nicholas initially intended this collection of original essays to be a sourcebook for writing groups, and, as the first book in a series sponsored by the International Writing Centers Association, to extend writing center scholarship beyond composition, even beyond academia. Each chapter attempts to connect literate action—teaching, tutoring, and writing—with theoretical discussions that help us understand practice. Such a wide range of case studies of successful writing groups in various contexts would be useful enough alone, either to writing center professionals or composition teachers. But Writing Groups also offers new perspectives on related topics, from collaborative learning and authorship to writing center theory and practice, composition pedagogy, and writing across the curriculum. Additionally, as a model for collaborative scholarship, Writing Groups presents an array of research genres and methods, and just as diverse a cast of authors: professors of writing and literature, writing center professionals, technical and creative writers, graduate students, community writers, public school teachers, a youth minister, a printmaker, a vocal teacher. In total, nearly forty writers, teachers, and scholars contributed to this volume.

Each chapter examines a distinct writing group in a particular setting, comprised of participants as varied as conventional composition students, homeless writers, prison students, adult creative writers, graduate students, and vocal artists. Some essays are composed by members of the groups themselves, others by observer-ethnographers; most are collaboratively written. Part 1 examines writing groups in academia, while part 2 looks beyond the classroom to the real world “extracurriculum,” where writing groups often flourish without teachers.

After an editorial introduction, the first chapters address classroom writing groups. In “Peer Writing Groups in the Prison College Classroom,” Rebecca Jackson examines obstacles to collaborative pedagogy in a composition course taught in a maximum-security male prison. Teachers in conventional classrooms might learn from this chapter how some students, especially males habituated to traditional (directive, hierarchical) teaching resist collaborative methods—sometimes for more rational reasons than we first imagine. Jackson concludes with a reminder that collaborative pedagogy is not ideologically neutral, and may not be appropriate for all students all the time.

Thomas K. H. Piontek’s “Writing Groups, Messy Texts” shows how our choice of texts and the kinds of discussions they generate can affect the quality of peer revision. The value of this article, for composition teachers, lies in the connections Piontek establishes between reading and writing as reciprocal, collaborative
activities—something that writing instructors strive to achieve but sometimes fail to enact.

Julie Aipperspach Anderson and Susan Wolff Murphy’s “Bringing the Writing Center into the Classroom” bridges traditional writing center and classroom domains. This chapter presents a straightforward case study of writing center-classroom partnerships, where writing tutors lead onsite group tutorials. While this chapter provides some needed theoretical context, its real strength lies in its practical suggestions and appendices of lessons learned that would be useful for anyone who wanted to adapt this program to a local setting.

Although Magdalena Gilewicz’s “Sponsoring Student Response in Writing Center Group Tutorials” addresses group tutorials in a conventional writing center context, her solutions to problems encountered in peer review would interest any classroom writing teacher. She focuses both on training tutors and educating student writers how to read each other’s essays. As with most chapters in this volume, Gilewicz provides a very useful bibliography. Another writing center collaborative is presented by Sharon Thomas, Leonora Smith, and Terri Trupiano Barry in “Shaping Writing Groups in the Sciences.” Their grant-supported project established writing groups with science graduate students in partnership with science and writing faculty. The article discusses the setup of the program, but also provides a great resource for thinking about writing in the disciplines and the special needs of graduate student writers.

Crossing the outer boundaries of higher education, H. Brooke Hessler and Amy Rupiper Taggart’s “Community Service and the Writing Group” explores the issues of reciprocity with heterogeneous writing groups. Their case study involves a community service writing group in which college and elementary students collaborate to produce texts. This essay introduces “reciprocal-expertise pedagogy” as a tool that any composition instructor can adapt to move students beyond just “writing for the teacher”—to help students engage with authentic discourse, audiences, purposes, and occasions. Particularly useful is a final section of “cautions and suggestions” for dealing with the “obstacles and opportunities” presented by teaching via community service, namely issues of resistance, assessment, authorship, diversity, and logistics.

To transition between school writing groups and those beyond, the editors chose to close this section and open the next with more explicitly rhetorical, theoretical chapters. Kami Day and Michelle Eodice’s “Coauthoring as Place” studies collaborative scholarship at the professional level, examining the character of successful partnerships such as Lunsford and Ede, and Blitz and Hurlbert. Importantly, Day and Eodice call attention to the kinds of personal relationships that potentially occur when scholars publish together. To some extent, this chapter also validates this entire collection, most of which is collaboratively authored. By grounding its discussion in rhetoric, specifically some imaginative and detailed interpretations of ethos, “Coauthoring as Place” delivers uncommonly well-integrated rhetoric-composition scholarship.
The second half of the book focuses on writing groups beyond academic settings, differentiated from school groups primarily by their exigency (self-sponsored) and their make-up (typically more diverse). Though Candace Spigelman’s “Deliberative and Epideictic Models” uses the lens of classical rhetoric to examine the interactions among members of a nonacademic creative writers group, her insights would also be valuable within school settings. Using an Aristotelian framework, she characterizes two complementary and necessary “species” of feedback: deliberative (practical, constructive, directive) versus epideictic (validating, community building, praise and blame). Both, she argues, are essential for successful collaboration in writing groups.

“StreetWise Writers Group,” by Paula Mathieu and others, describes the challenges and benefits of a group of homeless and formerly homeless writers and their editors affiliated with a street newspaper. Besides illustrating a kind of nonacademic writing and process with which many of us are unfamiliar, the essay explores important tensions between collaborative authorship and individual, creative identities. These author-participants also remind us how writers might achieve a powerful political voice using publication as social action.

In “Physical Context and Role Taking,” Rebecca Schoenicke Nowacek and Kenna del Sol investigate how both physical and temporal spaces shape writers’ capacity to collaborate effectively. Like most of the chapters in this second half, this essay also provides lessons that can transfer easily to the writing classroom. From their study of two songwriting/performing groups, Nowacek and del Sol conclude with practical suggestions: clearly articulate group objectives; enable participants to change roles; and be attentive to physical and temporal working conditions.

Linda Beckstead and others’ “Thursday Night Writing Group” presents a montage of brief reflections by eight members of an eclectic, mostly creative writing group. Members discuss the less practical but powerful interpersonal benefits of collaboration: inspiration, validation, and encouragement. Participants also share a common, practical insight—how their writing group taught them what kind of response they want and need from their readers, and how to get it.

The last two chapters discuss issues of identity more explicitly than others in this collection. Terry Trupiano Barry and others’ “Women and Writing Groups” describes how a graduate student writers group provided space to balance their personal and academic female identities—embodied in process-oriented, nurturing collaboration—with the demands of individuated textual production (and competition) in a professionalized academy. In contrast, Evelyn Westbrook’s “Writing Group as Contact Zone” studies constructive conflict in a diverse group of creative writers. Her South Carolina Writers Workshop group redefines collaboration—not always as irenic mutual support, but as confrontation between writers’ perspectives, often along the lines of race and gender differences.

Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom follows such landmark monographs in the field of collaborative writing as Peter Elbow’s Writing without Teachers (1973), Anne Ruggles Gere’s Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Im-
lications (1987), Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing (1990), and Candace Spigelman’s recent Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups (2000). The multivocality of this edition makes it less conclusive, perhaps even a bit less coherent than less ambitious works; but, as the editors rightly suggest, the real strength of this volume will be the many questions opened for readers who care to jump into the conversation.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by R. Mark Hall, California State University, Chico

Mark Waldo’s case for discipline-based WAC programs housed in writing centers begins with an apt counter-reading of the Bible story of the Tower of Babel. God may have punished the ancient Babylonians with the confusion of tongues for attempting to build a tower to reach the heavens, but such an ambitious structure, Waldo points out, could not have been achieved with one universal language in the first place. Building would have required communication in and among multiple discourse communities, including architecture, mathematics, brick-laying, carpentry and so forth, each with its own particular ways of imagining the project, thinking, and speaking. The university, Waldo argues, with its varied disciplinary specialties, is a Tower of Babel. In order to facilitate student writing amid the clamor of confusing and sometimes contradictory professional discourses, WAC programs should loosen ties to the assumptions and values about writing in composition studies and, instead, foster dialogic relationships with disciplines, helping them to identify and teach their own values for writing, not ours.

Waldo’s guiding assumption—that one writing doesn’t fit all—is not new, but is supported by decades of literacy research, which shows that writing is bound by the genre conventions of a particular context, with its own ways of thinking.