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GRADUATE WRITING GROUPS: SHAPING WRITING AND WRITERS FROM STUDENT TO SCHOLAR

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Leaders in higher education increasingly recognize that writing in graduate school doesn't come easily for many. Like undergraduates, many graduate students find they need structured writing support in order to succeed. In consequence, graduate writing is a growing topic in pedagogy and research as institutions make moves to provide some kind of support for their graduate students. Scholars such as Micciche, Rose, and also McClafferty have reported on attempts to address graduate writers' challenges through dedicated classes on writing. Tardy and Casanave, among others, have made graduate writers' development the subject of major research studies.

Although writing centers would seem positioned to respond to these newly recognized institutional needs, traditional tutoring can't always provide the long-term, extensive support that graduate writers need as they spend years working on theses and dissertations. Some writing centers have thus begun offering graduate writing groups as a productive means of providing that long-term support. These groups are able to serve multiple writers throughout their graduate careers with the investment of one or two hours of time each week on the part of the facilitator. They can be led by a writing center director, a faculty member, or advanced graduate students or tutors who have been part of a group themselves. Established groups may even be able to continue without the help of a facilitator. Groups may include members from the same, related, or different disciplines, although my experience has been that groups are most successful when the writers are either from closely related fields or else already know the other members of the group.

We still know little about how writing groups work, however, particularly at the graduate level. Gradin, Stewart, and Pauley-Gose's "Disciplinary Differences, Rhetorical Resonances" focuses specifically on graduate writing groups, discussing their formation, development, and benefits. They identify an alleviation of members' isolation and an increase in their rhetorical awareness and competence as two important benefits of participation. Moreover, they suggest that graduate writing groups actually "help students discover and fulfill the most important and most difficult purpose of their current academic project: becoming a colleague in one's field and entering into the discourse community of the discipline with authority" (par. 12). Graduate writing groups serve to shape their members from students operating on the periphery into established scholars.

Exactly how one "enter[s] into the discourse community" and becomes an established scholar is at the heart of Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory. They subscribe to a social theory of learning, arguing that learning occurs as novices engage in what they term *legitimate peripheral participation*—novices become experts not simply by observing or even, necessarily, through explicit teaching, but by engaging in activity around the edges and gradually circling closer, developing the requisite abilities and knowledge to become full participants. They argue that legitimate peripheral participation occurs in many different situations, but that *communities of practice* (hereafter, CoP) offer an especially effective environment. CoP are "people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems" or, I would suggest, graduate students learning to write in their fields (Wenger par. 1). Graduate writing groups are able to shape participants from student to scholar because of the CoPs that they form and because of the opportunities they offer writers to engage in legitimate peripheral participation.

Furthermore, legitimate peripheral participation is imbricated with the language of the discourse community and with what Gere terms *the language of negotiation.* In her seminal work, *Writing Groups: History, Theory, Implications,* Gere surveys the history of writing groups of all kinds, not just graduate groups. She identifies the language of negotiation as a common feature of most groups. Gere's use of the term refers specifically to the ways that writers phrase their suggestions and responses to another member's text. She writes that "the language [that groups use] is often tentative, with phrases such as 'I don't know' or 'I don't think' occurring frequently. Participants frame

comments in terms of their own experience with the writing rather than some 'ideal' text" (73).

I fully agree with Gere about the nature of talk in writing groups, but I also believe this concept, the language of negotiation, has many more layers of meaning that can help us understand how graduate writing groups function. In this essay I draw on my experience as a group facilitator and employ the work of both Gere and Lave and Wenger in order to offer deeper insight into what makes graduate writing groups work—into how they enable members to "enter into the discourse community with authority" (Gradin, Stewart, and Pauley-Gose par. 12). I argue that it is the language of negotiation operating within a CoP that makes graduate writing groups so powerful. Essentially, situated learning theory and CoP frame the big picture around graduate writing group successes; the language of negotiation offers snapshots into exactly how that success is achieved.

Shaping Writing Groups Through the Language of Negotiation

The language of negotiation offers much more than an explanation of how writers phrase critiques. It serves as a lens that helps us see the different ways that the work of an effective graduate writing group is accomplished as well as what marks a group as successful. The language of negotiation might best be described as the tentative, hedging language that writers use in discussing another writer's text. In addition to the examples Gere mentions, we might also include phrases and questions like "I'm not sure I understand," "Could you explain this to me?," "I wonder if maybe…," and "What if you…" as the language of negotiation. It is laced with conversational hedges and other face-saving language and is unlikely to employ to commands, directives, or other markers that might indicate assertiveness or aggressiveness.

Though this succession of hedges and politeness markers might initially be considered weak, they are actually crucial for creating functioning groups and for fostering revision. First, the language of negotiation allows writers and responders to save face, which is essential for encouraging group cohesion. A group can only function if all the members are engaged in the work of the group and have a reasonable level of trust in the one another. If a member is afraid of being strongly criticized, shamed, or ridiculed by another member, then the group is unlikely to be successful. This is particularly true of voluntary writing groups where a member who is hurt or embarrassed may stop submitting writing or leave the group entirely. The tentative, questioning, unassuming language of negotiation allows writers to save face, even when they have submitted weak texts to the group. It also allows other group members to save face when they are unsure of whether their critiques are valid. Enabling other members to save face builds trust and cohesion within the group and encourages the members to continue working on their writing.

The language of negotiation does more than allow writers to save face, though. It also works to encourage multiple levels of revision, which I discuss in more detail below. The language initiates multiple acts of negotiation by opening conversations with writers and encouraging them to rethink aspects of their texts. Finally, as I will conclude, engaging in these multiple acts of negotiation—explaining, rethinking, justifying, revising—also shapes the writers themselves by encouraging them to articulate a place for themselves as scholars. The language of negotiation, in all of its forms, is the tool that effective groups use to shape their members from students into scholars.

The members of both groups discussed here are multilingual writers—one cross-disciplinary group of doctoral students and one group of master's students in linguistics. The groups were sponsored by the university's writing center and facilitated by the writing center's director. Both of these groups functioned as a CoP by allowing members to share knowledge and by creating space for writers to engage in legitimate peripheral participation. Within the CoP of the group, these writers moved beyond the genre of the graduate seminar paper and began to tackle the prospectus, dissertation, article, etc.—the genres that mark them as scholars, not students. As they received feedback on their writing, they became more adept at employing the discourses of their fields to build arguments, appropriately challenge or respond to the arguments of others, and to create space for themselves as scholars. In short, as members learned more about the discourse of their fields, they became more active and respected participants within them.

For multilingual writers, this legitimate peripheral participation might be especially vital as the ongoing language learning process that multilingual writers are engaged in can make them even more peripheral—marginalized, even—socially, linguistically, and disciplinarily. However, none of the writers I discuss here reported such feelings during the group. This, of course, isn't to say that these writers never felt marginalized in some way, only that they didn't express it to me in the group. Moreover, with the exception of some additional vocabulary work, I didn't find either of these groups to be qualitatively different

from other graduate writing groups comprised of native English speakers. All of these writers were quite proficient in English, though, and appeared to be acculturated to their lives as graduate students in the U.S. Participation in a graduate writing group might be far more important and more fraught for writers' with lower levels of proficiency or who are less well-adjusted.

The doctoral group was composed of three students from Cultural Studies and two from Communication Studies, one of whom had done master's work in Cultural Studies. This group had been meeting weekly for several months when I joined them as an observer and began recording their hour-long sessions. They were an extremely high-functioning group, and by that I mean that all members were committed to their projects, to the group, and to producing writing on a regular basis. In addition, their discussions were lively, and they were very supportive of one another. More than just producing writing, though, they had learned how to identify global concerns in a text and how to talk about them effectively. They had learned many rhetorical conventions of their own disciplines and that those conventions were not universal. Finally, they were advanced and fairly confident writers. They had little need for sentence-level help but instead focused on development, clarity, and methodological concerns.

The members of the group were at very different phases of high-pressure doctoral programs that they had only three years to complete. Aaliyah, who was Sudanese, had just entered the Communications program but was already busy publishing and presenting findings from her master's thesis. Thema, a Ghanian, was drafting the final chapters of her dissertation in Cultural Studies. She functioned as the most established, knowledgeable participant in this CoP and was committed to bringing other members into fuller participation. She had learned the ropes of the program—how to survive the comps, what each professor's pet peeves were, who the preferred committee members were—and was invested in passing her information on to the "younger" members. Both Christopher and Geoff were in the middle of the Cultural Studies program. Christopher, a Kenyan, was in the midst of writing 40 pages of comprehensive exam answers, and Geoff, also a Ghanian, was writing the first three chapters of his dissertation in order to defend his prospectus. Finally Rahim, an Afghani in the Communications Studies program, was the newest member of the group and was still completing coursework. The first four members had been working together since the beginning of the academic year. Rahim joined in spring quarter, but he had been a member of a group with Aaliyah the year before and so he quickly acclimated to the group's dynamics.

The master's group of three linguistics students was a less mature group in terms of their writing and researching abilities, although they were also an effective group. They shared the common discourse of applied linguistics and language teaching and had already established relationships with one another during their graduate program. These factors, combined with the fact that they were all at the same stage of the same project—a master's "proseminar" research essay—seemed to enable them to quickly grasp the importance of global concerns and offer one another substantive feedback.

They began meeting with about 12 weeks left in the school year, having already conceptualized and designed their projects. Amisi, an Egyptian, was writing her thesis, and Reiko, from Japan, and Lina, from Indonesia, were both writing shorter master's essays which were due by the end of spring term. Unlike Thema in the Cultural Studies group, this CoP had no "senior" or "established" participants. All three writers had come through the linguistics program together as friends and were now learning the process of linguistics research together. Their projects were fully developed and data had been collected by the time we began meeting, but they had no experience with writing up research or with writing texts longer than 10-12 pages. They were all reasonably strong writers compared with other second-year master's students, yet novices compared to the doctoral group. Although they spoke English fluently, they were still learning academic English lexis and had significant levels of writing difficulties.

Shaping Writing Through the Language of Negotiation

Gere's original use of the language of negotiation was to describe the speech acts that group members engaged in to provide one another with feedback. Earlier I noted that one of the benefits of the language of negotiation was that its face-saving qualities build trust among group members and encourage group cohesion. Now, I'd like to extend her concept further to show how the language of negotiation opens up conversations with writers and thereby fosters revision at multiple levels of a text. Responding to a text—or the act of negotiating to encourage the writer to make particular changes—may entail anything from

improving a single word, to a sentence, to a paragraph/section, all the way up to reshaping an entire paper. I want to begin by looking at how negotiation works at the micro level of a text as this kind of work can be especially common in groups that include multilingual writers and in groups like the linguistics one where the writers have not yet achieved a high level of English proficiency.

Language specialists often use the phrase "negotiation of meaning" to describe the talk that happens between two speakers who are working to clarify understanding. Particularly when writers have not yet achieved a high level of proficiency, such negotiations often revolve around relatively minor features of a text like word choice. An example might look something like this:

> [writer's text] There are people who fit themselves into a box and believe in everything that could be explained by their belief.
> [reader] What do you mean by 'fit themselves into a box'?
> [writer] That some people only believe things their religion tells them is true.
> [reader] Oh, now I think I understand. Well, in American English we might say that "religious people are narrow-minded" or "religious people do not think critically" or even "religious people are brainwashed and believe only what they are told." Is that what you meant?
> [writer] Yes! That's it.
> [reader] Do you know the word "brainwashed?"
> [writer] Yes, I think I understand. What if I changed it to "Religious people are brainwashed to believe what their religions tells them?"
> [reader] That is much clearer, although that sentence will sound very harsh and maybe too mean, to some readers. "Brainwashed" has a very strong meaning. You could make the sentence a little less strong by adding "many" before "religious people" and say "almost seem to be brainwashed" instead of just "brainwashed." You could also say that "some people's religious beliefs force them into a box."

In this example, the reader and writer are working together to help the writer make her meaning more clear.

Negotiation of meaning at the micro level often requires engaging in vocabulary development as one member teaches another an idiom (e.g. "into a box"), collocation (e.g. "strong coffee" or "regular exercise"), lexicalized phrase ("chunks" of vocabulary, like "How are you? / I'm fine. How are you?"), or the connotations of a particular word (e.g. that "brainwashed" is highly negative or that "kids" is informal). In the linguistics group, where the writers were at a lower proficiency level, the language of negotiation regularly involved this kind of sentence-level negotiation of meaning in order to shape a text and develop the writer's vocabulary. This kind of negotiation is important for writers who are new to academia, as "unnegotiated" passages of writing quickly mark a writer as a peripheral member of the field. As members engage in the legitimate peripheral participation of the group, the negotiation that helps writers to master vocabulary also enables them to participate in the field more fully.

The language of negotiation also encompasses the reader's rhetorical stance within groups or the subjects and nature of a group's talk. Gere, discussing texts on a more macro level, observes that "negotiation, rather than application of absolute standards, guides participants as they aid one another toward better drafts" and that the language group members use is often tentative (73-74). The acts of negotiation Gere describes, though they seem tentative, are actually indicators both that the group is effective and that its members are engaging in legitimate peripheral participation. These acts reveal that the group members support one another and are committed to one another's success. They also reveal that group members understand that their texts are disciplinarily situated and in many cases, crafted for a very specific audience (i.e. one professor, one dissertation committee), even if they are somewhat unsure of what that discipline and audience require.

The language of negotiation was highly visible in the Cultural Studies group I observed. For example, when Thema, a Ghanian, would respond to Aaaliyah, a Sudanese, about Aaliyah's project, Thema would be careful to contextualize her reaction within the two national frameworks. And Julia, the group's facilitator from English Literature, because she was disciplinarily, racially, and nationally removed from the rest of the members, was always careful to contextualize her response as coming from an English Literature perspective and/or from a white American perspective. Group members would never say to one another "This is wrong," but instead something like, "In my country/field/hometown it would have been different," leaving the writer with the implied questions "Are you sure about this? Could you provide more evidence to convince me?" to stimulate a reevaluation of the passage in question. In the example below, Julia has a suggestion for Geoff's presentation but couches her suggestion carefully, aware that it might be disciplinarily inappropriate.

[Julia] How would it be received if you presented the lyrics to some of these songs on the screen?

[Geoff, after a bit of contemplation] It would be okay; I'm planning to have a lot of visuals.

[Julia] I think people will want to hear some of the music.

The language of negotiation makes suggestions, not demands. In this group, the negotiation stemmed in part from members' diversity of nationalities and experiences, although other groups I have facilitated or have been part of have behaved similarly. The choices of Julia and of Aaliyah to negotiate rather than demand or ridicule reveal group members' understanding that disciplines have distinct rhetorical conventions and so what is appropriate for one field may be very inappropriate in another.

Spigelman's analysis of writing group discourse using classical rhetorical terms offers further insight into how the language of negotiation happens. She notes that "writing group discourse is inherently persuasive" and argues that much of this persuasion is either deliberative, or "forward looking" and "oriented toward finding the best solution or most reasonable course of action" or else epideictic, "set in the present" whose "central purpose is praise or blame." For Spigelman, writing groups use "deliberative rhetoric when members interrogate the logic of an argument, suggest textual changes, or provide additional examples." Epideictic rhetoric, on the other hand, occurs "when they express an emotional response to a peer's essay or story and when they explain what they found meaningful or dissatisfying, attractive or ugly" (133).

Spigelman argues that "ideally, both rhetorical models should guide writing group practice" (133) and that was, indeed, the case for the Cultural Studies group of doctoral students. Deliberative rhetoric was most common in the group, but epideictic rhetoric was also present, although it tended to be restricted to word choice or a particular phrase that was awkward or that undercut the writer's authority. Given the genres that members were writing in, members more often employed deliberative rhetoric as they negotiated with the writer to make a methodological change, provide more evidence, context, or to make implications more explicit. Below is an example of deliberative rhetoric at work, as Aaliyah tries to convince Christopher, whose research investigates schooling for girl children in Ghana, to clarify or change his research methodology.

[Aaliyah] What do you mean by evaluating the program's effectiveness?

[Christopher] I am trying to see whether I can just remove the evaluation from the whole study because whenever you are talking about effectiveness it becomes more that you have to have something to show.

[Aaliyah] Not really, if you are doing qualitative. It depends on how you define effectiveness.

[Christopher] I was looking at enrollment, completion rate, and the last one is the quality of the school.

[Aaliyah] What do you mean by quality?

[Christopher] I'll look at access to textbooks and infrastructure—the teacher-student ratio, facilities like chairs because studies have shown that all of these things impact schooling—[even things like] the distance between the school and the home.

[Aaliyah] I was thinking of more like empowerment. Infrastructure isn't necessarily enough for impact.

[Christopher] One of my research questions is impact. The reason I was looking at parents etc. is because of the theoretical framework I chose, that all of these groups have impact on the girl child. The school can have all the facilities it needs, but the family can stop her from going to school.

[Aaliyah] Maybe the impact has to come more stronger in your research. Maybe because of the place of the research question, but I didn't see…?

[Christopher] I don't think "impact" stands out so much in the first chapter.

Aaliyah uses deliberative rhetoric here to negotiate with Christopher and make his argument more clear. Yet, Aaliyah's use of deliberative rhetoric is not an attempt at persuading Christopher for Aaliyah's sake—so that she can win the argument—but for Christopher's sake, so that he has an opportunity to reshape and strengthen his paper. Aaliyah's language of negotiation certainly aims to persuade, but it does so from the perspective of reader instead of evaluator, thereby drawing clear distinctions between the "owner" of the project—the writer—and those who are responding. And as Aaliyah questions and Christopher defends, they both understand the norms of their fields more fully and how to interact more effectively with other members of those fields. Their participation in the CoP of the group has moved both toward fuller participation in their fields.

Shaping Writers Through the Language of Negotiation

Participating in the CoP of a writing group and using the language of negotiation doesn't just shape

texts. Even while the group is ostensibly "shaping writing," the writer is being shaped in overt and covert ways as well. The language of negotiation works to build confidence and thus a writer's scholarly ethos, and this is perhaps the most valuable work of a graduate writing group. Writers build confidence as they engage in the sentence-level negotiation described above and also as their critical thinking skills improve.

Gere suggests that the critical thinking skills that group members often develop are directly connected to the language of negotiation: "As a result of this negotiation within writing groups, participants develop metalanguage about writing. This metalanguage…aids the growth of critical skills so frequently attributed to writing groups" and that are so critical to moving graduate writers towards full participation in the field (94-95). Aaliyah, a member of the Cultural Studies group, identified growth in her critical abilities as a primary benefit of her group participation:

> The writing group first of all gives me feedback on my work…. And then I think it develop me as a critical reader. Because if I have to read a different topic every week it's not just my paper, and then I think I just develop this critical reading skill. And then also, say like, seeing people—like sometimes I'll skip something but if someone [else] say it, I'll realize "Yeah, [that's right]. Sometimes I'll feel like there is something wrong with this paragraph, but I don't know what and then the variations of viewpoints help me to see things.

In addition to the benefits to her writing, Aaliyah recognized that the group was shaping her into a more skilled reader. As this recognition grew, she became more confident and authoritative in her writing.

Writing groups also build confidence explicitly through the epideictic work of encouraging and blaming. Even if a text is very rough, groups that are only moderately effective will still highlight the positive alongside their critiques because that action keeps a group cohering together. Julia, the facilitator of the Cultural Studies group, identified confidence building and the resulting ethos development as a key benefit of writing groups. She observed, "Ethos is huge and [so is] confidence-building. And that's from my own experience [as a member myself] and from leading. In the education group [I facilitate], one [member] is 67 years old and constantly we're increasing her confidence because she feels like she's not as capable."

Spigelman argues that epideictic rhetoric occurs when group members respond emotionally to a text in some way. Those emotional responses—those acts of praising and blaming—are not just directed at texts, but may even be directed at the writer herself for projecting (or failing to project) the ethos of scholar; thus, increasing confidence is about more than making the writer feel like she's written a successful text. The epideictic rhetoric in the Cultural Studies group often focused on word choice or phrasing; however, in many cases, the "blame" was a response to phrasing that seemed to damage the writer's ethos. The opposite was also true: At one point in a meeting Geoff nodded, responding to a particular rhetorical move that Christopher made, and said "Ah … you're becoming a professor!" Geoff recognized that Christopher had chosen the more authoritative language of scholar and made the epideictic move to congratulate Christopher for his choice. In doing so, he didn't just applaud Christopher's phrasing, but also Christopher's positioning of himself as a scholar. As Christopher's confidence grew, the group empowered him to take ownership of his work as a full-fledged scholar and to develop his scholarly ethos.

Conclusion

The language of negotiation writ broadly thus offers a variety of lenses into how effective graduate writing groups work. Though it may seem tentative and uncertain, the language of negotiation has powerful effects on group members and their writing. It first operates as a face-saving tool that encourages group cohesion and participation. When group members feel safe to share their writing and respond to the writing of others—even as disciplinary outsiders—the language of negotiation begins shaping the writing itself through negotiation of meaning and other suggestions for revision at all levels of the text. Fundamentally, almost all of the talk in a group is negotiation because members are either trying to persuade a writer to transform a text or to be sure to leave a text unchanged. Since no member actually has any power over any other member, negotiation is the only way to influence the writer's text. Yet, even as it is shaping the writing, the language of negotiation is simultaneously shaping the writer as other group members challenge her to defend her ideas, to respond authoritatively to questions about her work, and to position herself as a scholar. The questions and comments may come in a tentative, uncertain format, but they nonetheless ask the writer to rethink her choices, rearticulate her ideas, and engage with her audience. By responding to her graduate writing group CoP, a writer is practicing for later engagement with the rest of her discipline.

The graduate writing group then serves as a low-stakes CoP that helps writers move more fully into their disciplines' higher-stakes communities of practice. Writing groups can function as a safe space, offering writers the opportunity to try out those more authoritative positions, perhaps even trying on several different rhetorical stances until they find something that is both comfortable and credible. The writing group thus operates as a kind of rehearsal for its members. As writers move more fully in to the CoP of the writing group, they are simultaneously developing the skills and ethos that allow them to edge a bit closer to full participation in their disciplines' communities of practice.

Note

1. All names are replaced with pseudonyms.

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