

# The Subject Is Writing

Essays by Teachers and Students

**Second Edition**

Edited by  
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Boynton/Cook Publishers  
HEINEMANN  
Portsmouth, NH

Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc.  
A subsidiary of Reed Elsevier Inc.  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
<http://www.boyntoncook.com>  
Offices and agents throughout the world.

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The subject is writing : essays by teachers and students / edited by  
Wendy Bishop. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-86709-457-5

1. English language—Rhetoric—Study and teaching. 2. Report writing—Study and teaching. 3. English language—Rhetoric.  
4. Readers—Rhetoric. I. Bishop, Wendy.

PE1404.S85 1999

808'.042'071—dc21

98-56012

CIP

Editor: Lisa Luedeke  
Cover design: Darci Mehall, Aureo Design  
Manufacturing: Louse Richardson  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.  
03 02 01 00 99 DA 2 3 4 5 6

## The Cupped Hand and the Open Palm

Hephzibah Roskelly

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When I was in first grade, I was a bluebird. Funny that I remember that after so many years. Or maybe not so funny. I suspect you remember your label too. I remember being proud of being in the group I was in. Somehow everybody in Mrs. Cox's class knew it was pretty awful to be a yellowbird, common to be a redbird, and therefore best to be a bluebird. One student of mine remembers her experience in first grade this way: "My first-grade teacher waited for us to make a mistake in our group and then she'd pounce. She always stood behind our desks. That's because I wasn't in the fast reading group. I was in the bears." She laughs. "To this day I think bears are stupid." For Susan, like for many of us, the first-grade reading group is our first real experience with group work, and for many of us, like for Susan, it's not remembered fondly. Especially if you happened to be a yellowbird or a bear.

By third or fourth grade, though, your early memory may have dimmed a

little as group work began to get less attention. You and your fellow students were “tracked” by this point, grouped into classes according to the results of standardized achievement tests, so the need for “ability level” groups like the blue/red/yellowbirds within the classroom became less pressing. And by the time you entered middle school or seventh grade, probably there wasn’t much group work at all. In its place was “seat work,” which meant some sort of writing. If you were like most students, you wrote alone. Nobody ever saw your writing except your teacher and, very rarely, other students, if they happened to look at the bulletin board where the teacher occasionally posted the “A” papers. If you were writing answers to questions or coming up with ideas in class, you were often reminded to “cover your work” so that your friend in the desk across from you wouldn’t be tempted to copy. So you used a sheet of paper to cover your writing, or you hid your marks behind a wall you made with your hand, cupping it to keep what you wrote private. Covering your work became so natural that you might have even cupped your hand anytime you wrote *anything* in school—the beginning of a short story, a letter to the editor of your school paper or to your girlfriend—the kind of writing where “copying” would never occur. But you continued to cup your hand because by this time you had gotten the message. Writing is solitary, individual, something others can take away from you if you don’t keep it from them, and something others don’t see except when it’s “clean.”

These elementary school lessons about groups and about writing are deeply imbedded, so much so that you may react with suspicion or even hostility now when your writing class—a freshman composition course or some other—encourages group work. Your past experience with group work in reading hasn’t led you to feel that it will do much more than put you in some category you’d rather not be in, and past experience with writing suggests that sharing your work with someone else is foolish or illegal. Your college, after all, probably has an honor code that says something about giving and receiving help. Why should a composition teacher force the connection between writing and the small group, asking you to come up with ideas together, make plans together, read and revise together, and, strangest of all, write together?

I try to answer that question here. One of the reasons that group work fails in the classroom is that neither our past experiences in the reading group nor those with the writing lesson have given us much of a rationale for working in groups. When a person doesn’t know why she’s doing something, doing it seems relatively useless. Working in small groups, even though it’s an idea touted by theorists and teachers in composition, is limited in actual practice for just this reason: Students and sometimes their teachers don’t know why they’re doing what they’re doing when they meet in the small group. Just as important, students and their teachers aren’t aware of why they’re often so disposed against working in groups. I describe what underlies these attitudes so that you can begin to understand why group work fails sometimes and why it’s so potentially useful for your development as a writer.

## Why Group Work Fails

I asked a group of students who will be student teaching in high school English classrooms this semester to use their own past experiences and their developing ideas about teaching to speculate about what makes groups fail in the classroom. Their list may mesh with your own feelings about the small group in the classroom:

### *Too Many Chefs; No Chefs; Untrustworthy Chefs*

Students mentioned the possibility of the “one member who dominates,” who “thinks he knows it all,” who “can’t let the group decide.” Or the possibility of having several members who all wanted to lead. What some described as a domineering personality in the group, others saw as responsible. “Somebody always ends up doing the most work. And that’s usually me,” says Beth, one of my first-year students at the beginning of the semester. “When I was in high school there were always a few who didn’t want to do the work and goofed off, and they left the rest of us poor slobs to do it.” The fear that the work won’t be shared but shuffled off to one wimpy or guilty person is echoed in comments about who’s prepared, who volunteers, who shows up. A student teacher reports on her experience with being given too much responsibility for her group’s operation: “My classmates saw me as one of the smart kids and so in groups I was always expected to emerge as a leader and to get things done. There were many times when I felt I was carrying the load.”

An even bigger fear about responsibility and personality centers on trust. “I don’t know the other people in my group. Why would I want to talk to them about how I feel about anything?” asks a student teacher. And one freshman writer writing in her journal before her group met for the first time writes about her fears that the group won’t be responsible to her: “What if they think my ideas are terrible? What if they think I’m stupid?”

### *Chaos Rules*

At first, the fear of spinning out of control in the group may seem primarily to be a teacher complaint rather than a student one. And it’s true that the fear that there will be too much talk or that the talk will quickly get “off task” does prevent teachers from using group work at all, or they use it only sparingly and with rigid guidelines to control it. But students fear loss of control as well. When students are conditioned to the quiet classroom where only one person has the right to talk (the teacher) and the rest have the right to remain silent (the students)—and this is the typical classroom—students aren’t comfortable with a lot of noise and movement either. “It gets too disorganized,” one student lamented. “I’m an organized person. And I don’t like hearing what the other groups are saying.”

4. In class, see how many marks remain when the group pools all information.
5. Are there any words left? Guess about them. Ask somebody outside class.

You know what will happen before you do the test. You find out more and more by talking. You hear the contexts people have for knowing things like *Harlem Globetrotters*, and you bring up the context you have for knowing *Huguenot*. In other words, you'll illustrate how your knowledge gets stronger, better developed, more insightful, and more complete the more you combine your knowledge with others'. This combining always works better if it's informal, conversational, unpressured, in some way equal. That's why Trivial Literacy usually teaches so much. Because it's a game—it's fun, and the stakes aren't high. Group works need to be nurtured because it works, often playfully, to encourage the development of individual thought.

All writers need to hear their own voices, but I think they can only hear them clearly when they find them in the chorus of lots of other voices. Otherwise, for many writers the writing is hollow, without a sense of commitment or *investment* that characterizes the voices of confident, effective writers. Kenneth Bruffee (1984), who's a composition teacher and writer, makes this connection between the social and the individual explicit. "Thought is an artifact created by social interaction," he says. "We can think because we can talk, and we think in ways we have learned to talk" (640). We're stronger and better developed individual thinkers and writers because we interact with people in groups.

Partially because so much of writing is done in silence and solitude, college writers often fear the investment required in writing. They don't trust their voices; the only thing they do trust is the certain knowledge that they will be graded on what that voice is able to produce. They want control, and so they ask "How long does this have to be?" or "Can we use first person?" And they want to minimize risk, so they count words and number of footnotes, use simple sentence and forms they've read, and write with passive verbs that take them out of the writing. "It can be seen that Jane Austen was expressing feminist concerns," they might say, as a way of avoiding a declaration that *they've* been the ones to see it. They avoid the personal commitment that writing requires because it seems too dangerous to risk. It's as though you walked into a dark auditorium to speak to a group, knowing they were out there waiting but not knowing how many there were, how big the room was, or if you had a microphone. You'd probably clear your throat a few times, and test the sound, but if you could see nothing but your speech, and you knew you were being judged each time you opened your mouth, you might likely be stunned into silence.

Your small group functions as a visible audience, a literal sounding board for your voice, and, as Bruffee (1984) and others suggest, a source of your

growing knowledge of the world. As such, the group alleviates the sense of powerlessness in writing (and thinking) that so many student writers feel and thus reduces the fear of commitment and investment by helping you to hear your voice clearly.

### The Group at Work: First-year Writers Writing Together

The group lessens writers' deep and real fear of taking responsibility for what's on the page in lots of ways—by supporting and strengthening individual writer's attempts, providing other perspectives on ideas, and sharing responsibility. All of these benefits for the writer occur when groups do all kinds of activities together—read, comment, discuss, plan, interpret—but they're most visible and dramatic when groups write together. That's why I'm using this example of the work of the group from my freshman writing course.

Students had been in their 101 class and in groups for five or six weeks when I gave the assignment. They were already comfortable talking about writing and ideas. But this task asked them to go a step farther, to write together a short (two- or three-page) collective response to Dorothy Parker's funny and bitter short story "You Were Perfectly Fine." The story is primarily a dialogue between a male and female character discussing the events at a party the night before. The man's guilt about getting drunk leads him to pretend he remembers a "promise" he's made to the woman, who pretends too in order to hold him to it. After reading the story and doing some quick in-class writing, groups met to begin to decide how they felt about the hungover, guilty man, the seemingly sympathetic woman, and the reasons for the dishonesty in the dialogue. As groups talked, they jotted down notes, often asking one another to repeat or clarify, often interrupting one another with revisions. Some groups talked mostly about the distinctions between social life in the twenties, when the story was written, and the present. Others concentrated on whether it was the man or the woman who was more to blame for the hypocrisy. In the next week and a half, groups argued about men and women and Dorothy Parker, and they worked out ways to allow for varying perspectives and to combine them. Everybody had to negotiate what to say and how to say it, who would write the final copy, where they would revise. All the talk and writing helped them find new ways to make points and gave them finally the new voices they needed to write together.

Here's the first paragraph of one of the papers:

Dorothy Parker's negative view of relationships between men and women is obvious in "You Were Perfectly Fine." We analyzed the story as readers and listeners. Reading it, we felt that the woman was basically honest and the man without credibility. Then listening to it our ideas changed. We got more of a sense of the female being manipulative, romantic and lovesick, but

### *If You Want Something Done Well—*

One student teacher remembers her 101 class doing revision of essays in small groups:

We had writing groups to comment on each other's papers. This was fine except that no one would make any comments about my papers. I guess because my grammar is sound they couldn't find anything to say because they didn't know what else to look for.

A typical group dialogue went something like this:

*First person:* I don't see anything wrong with your paper.

*Second person:* Me neither.

*Third person:* Yeah, it's a good paper. You'll get an A.

*Me:* Well, what did you think about it?

*First person:* Everything. The whole paper is fine.

*Second person:* I liked your topic. How did you think of such a good topic?

*Third person:* Yeah. You'll get an A.

Not only did this fail to give me any useful feedback, but it also put me in an awkward position when the time came for me to comment on others' papers. They were so full of admiration and praise for mine, how could I say anything negative about theirs? So a vicious cycle where no one benefited was created.

Related to this feeling of the group not helping because no one knows what to do within the group is the feeling that the work they do is not very important. "It's a waste of time. I think teachers have us get in groups when they don't have anything left to say and don't want to let the class go. We just read the paper in my last class. Or maybe talked for five minutes and then read the paper." Another writer says, "I kept changing what my group said or changing what I said to match them. It would have taken a lot less time and been better just to do it myself."

### **Why—and How—a Group Works**

These students tell the story of why group work fails in the classroom. The stories reveal deep and often unconscious beliefs about how the writing class is supposed to proceed, about how writers are supposed to work. The beliefs come from those old experiences with reading groups and with writing. But they also come from what we've all imagined about how people learn in school. School, we've determined, is competitive, not cooperative, and therefore it's the individual not the group effort that counts. And counting is what school is all about. Who has the most points, the most stars, the most A's?

Who's the bluebird? The fact is we assume that effort can only be measured by a grade and that a grade can't fairly be given to a group. So attempts to work as a group seem futile and unnecessary given what we've assumed school is all about—keeping not sharing, winning not collaborating, cupping the hand, not opening the palm.

If it were true that people learn to think and write primarily alone—in solitary confinement so to speak—it might also be true that group work is wasted effort, or unhelpful or too chaotic or too hard. But the truth is that people don't learn—in fact, can't learn much at all—in isolation. They learn *by engaging in the world*. They come to terms with what's around them, understand it, through sound and movement, through talk. A child who never hears talk, as tragic cases show, never talks or talks only very little. Talking presumes at least one listener or commenter. Group work, then, because it encourages engagement—talk and reflection and response—mirrors the way people learn things inside and outside the classroom, the ways in which they make sense out of the world.

So conversation, communication with others, is vital to our understanding of others and ourselves. And people can't communicate unless they listen—work toward a shared notion about how to proceed. Do you know the movie *Airplane?* It's actually one long joke about how communications gets muddled when that shared notion doesn't exist.

"These people need to be taken to a hospital," the doctor says.

Walking up, stewardess Julie looks at them. "What is it?" she asks.

The doctor is impatient. "It's a big white building with sick people in it.

But that's not important right now." Or:

"Surely you can't mean it," Julie says.

"I mean it," the doctor says. "And stop calling me Shirley."

Julie and the doctor don't communicate because they haven't decided on a shared basis for their talk. They mistake words and ideas and don't care enough (because then it wouldn't be funny) to get it right before they go on. In the classroom group, when shared work and talk do take place, real communication can occur. People learn to listen to one another and use one another's talk to test and explore their own talk more fully. This notion of learning and understanding as essentially shared rather than possessed by one individual can be tested using a little game I came up with called Trivial Literacy (after E. D. Hirsch's best-selling book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, 1987):

1. Choose part of Hirsch's list (or any list of words). A part of one list might read something like *hambone, harridan, Holden Caulfield, Huguenot*.
2. Mark every word you don't know or can't guess about.
3. In your group, see how many marks you can eliminate by getting information from others:

dishonest and deceitful. Peter, the man, seems sensitive and witty, although he ends up being weak and panic-stricken. They seem like real people. Between reading and listening, we've learned that both these characters are dishonest and the relationship probably doesn't stand a chance.

This group ends their piece with a modern tale of deceit that connects romance in Parker's time and in their own, using one of the group member's own experience with deceit in relationships: "It's hard for men and women to be honest with each other whether they live in the Roaring Twenties or right now. Nobody wants to hurt somebody or get hurt themselves."

Notice that the voice in this excerpt is strong. It's controlled; that is, students talk both about the story and the relationships within it, but they feel free enough to be personal too, using the personal pronoun "we" and including a real-life example. There's a clear sense of commitment, interest, and investment in the task.

Collaboration in the group removed or alleviated some of the most debilitating fears about writing for the freshman writers in my class, and this ability of the group to nurture confidence proves how useful the group can be in strengthening the writing process in individual writers. I bet that these fears about writing hit close to your own.

### *Fear of Starting*

Many writers find a blank page of paper so intimidating that they delay beginning as long as possible, searching for the perfect sentence opening, the right title, the best word. But because in the group there were four or five sets of ideas about a particular sentence or a way to open or a character, no writer stared at her paper waiting for inspiration. Inspiration, in fact, came from the talk that went on in the group. "Wait a minute," a group writer would say. "Is this what you said?" And she'd read it back. Another member would say, "It sounds better like this." "And why don't we add something about his past?" another would add. Writing happened so fast that nobody had time to dread not being able to find the idea or the word they wanted to begin.

### *Fear of Stopping*

One first-year writer told me once that her writing was like a faucet with no water pressure—"it won't turn on hard—it just dribbles till it stops." Lots of writers fear that once they get the one good thought said, or the two points down, they'll be left with nothing but dead air time, and that they'll have to fill it with what one of my students calls "marshmallow fluff." But none of the groups had difficulty maintaining writing after they began. The group kept ideas flowing, and changing, and if one person was losing momentum, another would be gathering it. Ken Kesey, the author of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's*

*Nest* (1962) and a teacher, comments on this effect as he describes a collaborative project—an entire novel—that his creative writing class worked on in one group: "Some days you just don't have any new sparkling stuff. But when you got thirteen people, somebody always has something neat and it's as though somebody on your team is on and you're off" (Knox-Quinn 1990, 315).

### *Fear of Flying*

When you have a personal stake in your writing, a belief in your voice and in what you're saying, and a trust in your reader to hear you out, your writing soars. "Everyone can, under certain conditions, speak with clarity and power," composition teacher Peter Elbow says. "These conditions usually involve a topic of personal importance and an urgent occasion." The group helped make the topic personally important since each writer had to justify decisions and ideas to the others, and the occasion was urgent since talk, writing, and real communication were necessary to make decisions in a limited time.

## The Group and Changing the World

So what does this long example from my first-year class prove? First, the group validates rather than hurts or lessens the individual voice. The group reinforces the effort involved in writing, talking, by the energy and specificity with which they both support and challenge the writer's thinking. Ken Kesey watched larger perspectives get developed on character and plot in the novel his class wrote: "When we would sit down around the table . . . and start writing our little section, boy you could hear the brain cells popping. They knew they had to write and had to fit in with the other stuff. You couldn't be too much yourself" (Knox-Quinn 1990, 310). But knowing that gives writers a clearer sense of self when they write individually. Not being "too much yourself" is a way of finding what your writing self really is.

"People think it's about competing with each other," Kesey says, speaking of writers and writing. "But the real things that you compete with are gravity and inertia—stagnation" (Knox-Quinn 1990, 315). Writing is not some sort of contest between you and everybody else in the class, with the one who has the best grade—the fewest red marks—winning at the end of it, and that's why the cupped hand is a poor metaphor for what happens when you produce writing in a classroom. The struggle, the contest, is internal, between your desire to talk on paper and your fear or distrust of it. The group helps us compete with the real opponent of creative, critical thought—inertia, the fear of making a move.

As Kesey's work with his creative writers and my work with my first-year writers suggest, the group gives writers the strategies for winning that contest. I remember a few years ago, a freshman writer was writing an essay whose

topic turned out to be something about the advantages of watching TV. She was bored with it, but chose it quickly as she was casting about for anything to do. The essay began, "There are many disadvantages to sitting in front of a TV. But there are some positive things about TV." Well, you get the idea. It was uncommitted, with no sense of the personal investment I've been describing, and a feeling in the writing of inertia. The writer wasn't just writing about couch potatoes; she was writing couch potato prose. When she read aloud her opening to her group the next day, she became aware that the group was growing glassy-eyed. She finally gave up. "It's bad, huh?" They laughed. Then she started talking. All of a sudden the couch potato had stood up. She was exploring an idea she was creating for and with her group.

Look back at the idealistic subheading that began this last section. Changing the world seems a pretty grandiose goal for group work, doesn't it? "Freshman Arrive But Not to Change the World" read the headline in an article this fall in the *Greensboro News and Record* that described how first-year students in colleges across the country didn't believe they would make real changes in the world outside themselves. I think the article was wrong. I think people want to change the worlds they live in, but they feel increasingly powerless to do it. And here's the last and best reason for the group. Because they force writers and thinkers to consciousness, groups foster action and change.

Deciding on what's significant about what you're reading, what you're writing, what you're listening to, what you're writing in a group, is the beginning of an understanding that you make knowledge in the classroom. You don't just find it in a book, and you don't just apply it from a lecture. You *create* it. That's a potentially powerful piece of information. Once you realize that you make knowledge, you see that you can act to change the knowledge that's there. As students of writing, your work in the group can help you become aware that the knowledge of the subject matter you work with, of voice, of forms and styles can be determined by you and those around you. The more your group meets and talks about reading, writing, and ideas, the more your group collaborates, the more *authoring* you do. What seat work and the bluebirds taught you to see as private and unique the group can help you recognize as also shared and social. And that realization really can help you make a difference in the world around you and within you.

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### Sharing Ideas

- As a writing student, I've experienced positive and negative writing groups; Hephzibah's essay helps me understand why this is so. And, she explains that group work actually doesn't take place all that often. Is that true to your life in school?
  - Imagine that you're in a writing group and it's spinning out of control: One member is talking too much, or one member is never prepared, or two members are ignoring you and stranding you with that fourth person who never talks. Still, you believe in groups because last week even your struggling group gave you a great idea for revising your paper. How might you cope with each of these scenarios (and any other nonworking scenarios you can dream up)?
  - For you, what is at stake in your classroom groups?
  - Hephzibah claims that groups help writers by giving them voice. Is that true for you and to what degree?
  - Can groups be useful even if not every member agrees? In fact, how effective are groups when every member does agree?
  - Say that it's Christmas break. You're going home and telling your parents or a good friend about your writing class and writing groups because they've never experienced this method for learning to write.
  - Share some tips for sorting out the different advice you receive from peers when sharing ideas or writing in a group.
  - If you were able to form a writing group composed of your favorite authors, who would the members be, and how might they get along?
  - Before this class, did you align yourself with the cupped hand or the open palm model? Tell some stories.
-