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Article

Gender and Peer Response

> Elizabeth Tomlinson

New Voice

This case study examines written peer response materials generated by small groups with varying gender compositions. Based on those observations, I offer several pedagogical implications.

When I collect student evaluations of their first-year composition experiences, inevitably comments on group work emerge, because in my classroom students sit in groups daily and participate in group work at least once per week. The work of a long line of scholars, including Anne Ruggles Gere, John Trimbur, Kenneth Bruffee, Martin Nystrand, and Hephzibah Roskelly, has suggested that collaborative learning provides a means for promoting an equitable classroom wherein everyone may contribute freely. However, groups do not always proceed productively in practice.

For instance, in a recent class one woman wrote in her end-of-semester group evaluation, "The women do most of the work, but sometimes the boys surprise me with effort and thought." In an all-female group on the other side of the classroom, two students wrote, "We all get along so well." Nevertheless, they then identified their "niceness" as problematic at times: "Sometimes we might sugarcoat what we really think about the paper." Meanwhile, a member of an all-male group in the same class wrote that his group was "four guys who can relate well to and with each other." But, he also noted, "Sometimes we did things just to get them done, not as thorough as we should've been." Because of my students' varied reactions to their groups' processes and outcomes, many of which they appeared to attribute to gender roles, I initiated further exploration of whether groups' gender composition influences students' written contributions to their groups.

Based on that exploration, I suggest that groups' gender make-up often does influence written feedback provided by group members during peer response sessions. By better understanding the potential impact of gender in this situation, other instructors in similar positions may be better able to create communities of influence wherein everyone's contribution is valued. In the following section, I briefly review the literature on gender roles in small groups. Next, I explain my rationale and method for employing peer response sheets within groups, again drawing from the relevant literature. I then share and discuss the results of this classroom-based