Using Writing Portfolios in First-Year Composition

Rather than grade each student paper in the traditional manner, you may decide to evaluate writing according to a modified portfolio system. I call this a modified system since you will always be offering, at a minimum, a class grade at mid-semester. New teachers and first-year writers sometimes encounter difficulties when grades are deferred over the course of an entire semester, although experienced teachers often follow such a strategy. New teachers need to conduct on-going evaluation in order to learn how to rank and assign grades fairly, and students who are required to take First-Year Composition often feel more concerned than elective students about their grades. Therefore, if you decide to follow the portfolio system, you must offer a mid-semester grade-in-progress to all students in First-Year Composition classes.

Writing portfolios provide an orderly presentation of a disorderly process, for they are the culmination of a semester’s worth of student work. When compiling a writing portfolio, student writers learn that revision is a long-term, recursive process. As they share drafts with peers, tutors, and their teacher, these writers become aware of a variety of audience needs. Through reflection on and response to such conversations, students revise their work into a portfolio representative of their best academic prose. In this classroom, the teacher works as both advocate and evaluator, helping writers select and present work for the end of semester evaluation in the portfolio. And when student work is “published” in this manner, writers can take pride in their own maturity of expression. Surveying a completed portfolio, students realize that they have written a lot (portfolios often contain many layers of drafts) and that they did grow as writers from the first day to the last day of the class (last papers look more expert to writers than first papers); students, literally, become practicing writers. These are only a few of the ways students benefit from preparing portfolios.

Portfolio evaluation isn’t necessarily easier for teachers; it is, however, a useful evaluation process for any workshop classroom. In such a writing classroom, teachers want to guarantee that writing evaluation includes both “measurement (or grading or ranking) and commentary (or feedback)” as described by Peter Elbow (“Trustworthiness in Evaluation,” Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching, New York: Oxford, 1986, 231). In such a writing classroom, teachers make an effort to assure that evaluation goals match class goals, thereby avoiding what Linda Brodkey calls practices that contradict curriculum (“Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing,” College English 39 [October 1988]: 414).

Portfolio Evaluation

Papers in portfolios must go through drafts. Since portfolios present students’ best work generally (submitted after papers have been discussed and improved), all portfolio pieces will have gone through drafts. Depending on the teacher’s class organization, drafts may have been thoroughly critiqued in peer response groups, in student/teacher conferences, and in tutoring sessions. Over time, students bring three levels of drafts to class: rough (zero or discovery drafts), professional (draft #2 to #10+, depending on a student’s own writing process), or portfolio (drafts submitted for mid-semester or end-of-semester teacher evaluation). Draft levels, audiences, and formats are summarized here:

**Rough Draft:**
- written for student as she generates her ideas
- written for the student’s peer group
- must be legible to writer for oral sharing with peers in order to receive verbal critiques

**Professional Draft:**
- written for student as she reviews, revises, and refines her ideas, and
- written for the student’s peer group, the teacher, friends, writing center tutors, etc.
- drafts must be legible to other readers (preferably typed or word processed)
- when shared with peer group, copies are provided for all group members who respond with oral critiques and/or written critiques
- when shared with teacher, teacher responds with written or oral (conference) critiques to discuss revision directions

**Portfolio Draft:**
- written for the public—including student, teacher, and interested readers—after incorporating earlier revision suggestions.
- typed and then presented with rough and professional draft versions in mid-semester and end-of-semester portfolios.
Although this overview distinguishes between three draft levels, papers may go through many more revisions than three (and in rare cases fewer revisions may occur). Equally, a mid-semester portfolio quality draft may receive further consideration and drafting for end-of-semester portfolio evaluation. In any event, portfolio presentation requires some version of a planned drafting cycle. To help students from falling behind in their semester writing commitment, you should always request drafts on set due dates. If you feel the need to provide regular graded critiques to give students a formal sense of their academic progress, you can grade papers each time they are turned in, providing penciled grades on the professional draft; some teachers place these temporary grades in their grade books only, not on papers, and students are encouraged to conference about papers and learn what the grade would be at that point. New teachers will want to calculate grades on at least one set of early papers, whether they share these grades with students or not since they need to share a set of graded papers with their teaching mentors each semester. Remember, lack of grades should not be confused with a lack of evaluation; with each paper, the student writer is receiving considerable, valuable, oral and written commentary from class peers, tutors, friends, and teacher.

Fairness in Grading
Evaluating portfolios on your own, you may develop grading concerns that parallel the concerns you have when grading individual student papers. For instance, what constitutes an A, B, or C level portfolio? How do you assure that you are fair in your evaluations, not awarding a “fat” ineffective portfolio more credit than a “thin” focused portfolio, and so on? Such concerns are central for any teacher instituting a portfolio system. Several practices can help:

- Begin a portfolio system by outlining goals for portfolios as used in that class and write a rubric that details what is expected from a portfolio in each grading category (A, B, C, etc).
- Share this rubric (or concepts from the rubric) with students during class discussion, in conferences, and in mid-semester evaluation commentary.
- Use a formalized response sheet. By checking off materials received and recording responses in categories, you are forced to look up from the mass of writing collected and evaluate it as a whole effort. The checklist can include an “improvement” category or a “participation” credit as well as an evaluation of portfolio draft quality.

Different Time, Not Less Time
Portfolios do not provide a grading panacea. Evaluating student writing does and probably always will take up a large portion of your available time. But writing portfolios change the quality of the time and the pacing of the time demands. For instance, evaluating professional quality drafts does not require that you carry papers home and make copious marginal and end comments. When responding to drafts, you might address content level concerns by writing a summary response paragraph and deal with usage concerns in a student/teacher conference. In a draft-oriented classroom, student drafts become familiar. By the time you read a mid- or end-of-semester portfolio, you are looking at well-known student work and making a holistic judgment about writing quality and writing improvement. Careful reading is required but not hand (and mind) numbing paper marking. In all our classes, students are expected to save their drafts and turn them in at the end of the semester; portfolios make more sense out of this practice (students should continue to be encouraged to keep their own copies of their own work).

The first time you work with portfolios, you should still record professional drafts as received or not received and/or to record grades (if you give grades-in-progress). While your week-by-week grading time commitment may decrease with a portfolio system, your evaluation time commitment will increase temporarily when you collect mid- and end-of-semester portfolios. Here are some organization suggestions and variations:

- You can offer a mid-semester grade-in-progress, continuing and finalizing your evaluation when reviewing all papers in the final portfolio, or you can divide your portfolio evaluation period into two equal parts; evaluate the first 1/2 of the semester’s work and then “retire” this work before going on to evaluate the second 1/2 of the semester’s work; remember to keep all copies of student papers, though. You may wish to weigh the second 1/2 of the semester’s grade slightly higher (60%), expecting writing to improve more impressively the longer students work at developing their writing processes.
- In each 1/2 semester cycle, you can have students choose their own best work for graded evaluation. That is, of three papers, two are submitted but not graded while a third, best paper, alone receives on-text markings and a grade. When doing this, students learn to weigh and evaluate their own writing ever more objectively, working with the teacher, class peers, or writing center staff to decide which of their essays is the most effective from a reader’s viewpoint; however, remember that in First-Year Composition, students must complete all essays in order to qualify for course credit.
If you are evaluating all papers at the end of the semester, again have students choose two or three of their papers for grading; use the last two weeks of class to focus on editing these “best” papers before they are turned in. Students have a greater incentive to proofread portfolio quality drafts than rough or professional drafts and may have greater success learning to proofread and edit when working with a limited number of papers.

You can collect writing portfolios up to two weeks before the end of the semester, offering you more review time under less time pressure. During the final week or two of classes, students can be preparing a photocopied “class book” of peer chosen and edited writings, and so on. Allow plenty of conferencing time for the last week of classes and for the week of finals so you can review the writing portfolio with each writer in order to reach a satisfying sense of class closure. (Adapted from “Designing a Writing Portfolio Evaluation System.” The English Record 40.2 (1990): 21-25.)

Small Groups and Workshops

Workshop Formats
There is no “best” workshop method. However, there are things students and teachers can do to make each public sharing more productive. The following summaries and suggestions can help you and your class develop its own best format. This discussion is directed toward a student-writer audience and you might find it useful to reproduce parts of it for your class.

One-to-One (Partner) Sharing
Often, especially at the beginning of a writing class, you will be asked to work with one other writer. Together you will share early drafts, explore an issue and report to the class, perhaps, even, compose and/or revise a piece of writing.

Benefits
- One-to-one sharing can be less intimidating than group sharing.
- Sometimes, two people can accomplish more than a larger group because only you and your partner have to agree.
- Quieter individuals with good ideas often share them more freely with a partner.
- Working in pairs helps writers really get to know another class member.

Drawbacks
- If you’re paired with someone whose learning style–introverted versus extroverted–or values–Republican versus Democrat–or work habits–meticulous versus freewheeling–are different than yours, some time can be lost as you learn to agree and compromise.
- Sometimes other partnered pairs seem to be working more smoothly or having more fun; this is the “grass is greener” syndrome.

Activities
- The first day of class, you may be paired with another class member to conduct a brief interview of their writing past and class interests. Find out several odd, unusual, or interesting things about the individual. Find out how she/he received her name. You’ll be asked to introduce your partner to the class.
- After one of the invention activities that you write in class, you may be asked to share your writing with a partner. Listen to each other’s freewrite, identify the parts that are most interesting, and give your partner several ideas for expanding that freewrite into a sharable writing for the next class.
- After a class response session–either group response or full class–you may be asked to bring in a revised version of a workshop piece and the original. In pairs, with a partner, share the two versions and analyze the success of the changes you made.
- Near the end of the class, you may be asked to help a partner edit final drafts that he or she is getting ready to turn in as a writing portfolio. Read each draft carefully, making notes of changes that you think should be made. Then, talk to your partner about each piece.
- Mid-semester and/or the last day of class, you may be asked to exchange portfolio writings with a partner. Your task is to compare your writing style and class development with your partner’s style and class development in a few paragraphs.

To Become a Productive One-to-One Partner
- Whenever you work with a new class partner, take a few minutes to introduce yourself and find out his/her interests and goals for the activity.
- Be up front about your own biases. Try to adapt to your partner’s style and clue your partner in to your own.
- Be as honest and open as possible. If you don’t think your work together is progressing, try to express this and make a change right now.
Be supportive and praise your partner for work accomplished.

Small Group Sharing
Small group sharing between three to six members is becoming more and more common in the writing workshop. Groups may work together for an extended period of time like a unit or a semester or change membership each time they convene. There are benefits to both practices. When you work with the same individuals for a long period of time, you come to know their strengths and weaknesses and you become comfortable with them. At the same time, sometimes you become too comfortable and forget to challenge each other to work to the best of your abilities. When this happens, or when one member gets restless, it is useful to have one member from each of the four or five class groups "travel" to another group. He or she will be glad for the opportunity to move on, and your group will welcome a new member, and that new member’s new perspective.

Benefits
- Small groups allow you to spend more time on each writer’s work.
- Some writers are more likely to speak up with a small group of peers than when they know a full class and teacher are listening to what they say.
- Members of small groups get to know each other, each other’s work, and become informed respondents and, often, friends.
- Small group talk may be more supportive and less critical than large group talk where students are trying to display their knowledge for the teacher.
- The teacher can only “visit” groups, so he is not as likely to impose his taste and ideas on class members.
- In groups, you are more in charge of your learning and you can partially set the pace.
- You may decide to continue to work with your group members after the class is over or outside of class hours. Often, these individuals form a valued writing community with you.

Drawbacks
- If group members aren’t prepared, nothing gets accomplished.
- If some group members are too competitive, other members start to withdraw from projects and nurse grudges.
- If group members don’t remember to invite the teacher into some of their conversations, they may lose her expertise.
- If groups allow one member to dominate by talking too much, imposing her ideas, or slowing down the work by going off on tangents, little will be accomplished.
- Group work can take time since each member has a voice and understandings and agreements must be negotiated.

Activities
- Try a fishbowl exercise to explore the strengths and weaknesses of writing groups. Your teacher will provide you with a sample piece of student writing. One class member volunteers to be the writer. Four class members volunteer to be the group. The Writer reads the piece aloud to her group and asks members to respond in the following four ways:
  - Members should tell the writer what was most successful in the piece.
  - Members should tell the writer at what point(s) in her text they became confused and/or wished they had more information.
  - Members should tell the writer what she/he should do to improve the piece when redrafting.
  - Finally, the writer summarizes what she learned from Group Members and asks questions of them of her own.
- At the end of this mock-response-session, class members who have been observing it discuss what they saw. Class members should mention what was most useful in the session and suggest ways the group members and writer could have supported each other even more fully.
- As a group, conduct a response session, using another writing sample provided by your teacher as well as one piece provided by a member of your group. Each group in class should do this. Groups choose one member to read the sample writing that your teacher provided and then take ten minutes to offer responses. Next, respond to the writing of one group member. Compare your responses to the two pieces. How did the group respond when the writer was absent? How supportive and how critical were the remarks? How did the group respond when the writer was present? How supportive and how critical were the remarks? How can you, as group members, adopt the best response styles of both sessions?
- Your group may be asked to respond to early drafts of each other’s work.
- Your group may be asked to share journal or reading responses and report to the class. Be sure to ask your teacher how much time you have for completing your work.
- Your group may be asked to compose or revise together.
- Your group may be convened regularly to respond to late revision drafts of group members’ writing.
Your group may be convened to read group members’ potential submissions for a class book and to offer advice on which piece to submit. You may read group members’ work for portfolios, helping the member edit the work and/or decide which of several selections would be best to submit.

To Become a Productive Group Member
- Work with people you don’t know—don’t try to always get in a group with a best friend, romantic partner, people of the same gender, etc.
- Be meticulous about your part. If you need to read class materials the night before group work, be sure to do so; don’t rely on others to do your work for you. If you need to prepare materials for the group to review, have the copies ready and available on time.
- Be on time. If you always slip into your group late, you force group members to waste time re-explaining the group activity to you.
- Keep track of your participation. It’s worth asking yourself if you’re talking enough and if you’re talking too much. It’s worth trying to change your group’s habits, starting with your own.
- Realize that groups need to have members performing specific roles. At a minimum, you’ll need a timekeeper who helps you assure that each member’s work is discussed. Also, you may need a group historian who takes notes on a discussion and shares them later with the full class. Last but not least, being a general group member means trying to help facilitate all these activities. Also, no one should always take the same role; exchange roles and expand your capabilities.
- Share your feelings. If you feel your group is unproductive, try to bring up issues that are bothering you. If need be, try to talk to your teacher about ways to improve your group’s work.
- Help keep your group on task. It’s easy to slip into small talk. Groups need to catch up and get reacquainted each time they start a session, but a group that talks more about your school’s football team than about writing is wasting every member’s time.

Full Class Sharing
In any writing workshop, some of your time will be devoted to full class sharing. Although some students seem to prefer small group sharing and others full class sharing, there are beneficial aspects to both, and most teachers try to strike the best balance. Without exception, writers seem to feel that critiquing the work of peers is difficult but, ultimately, rewarding, with the full group activity being the hardest to manage. For instance, there are often tense moments at first: “It felt like when everyone was waiting for someone else to start the critique, I was always the one to open her big mouth. I could only think of how awful I’d feel if it was my writing and no one had anything to say,” said one writer to explain why she made herself break the ice and start to respond. Another observed, “I like the whole class workshops because getting other readers’ opinions helps me to understand the work I read in the critique sessions. It also helps to hear how the authors read their own work instead of just reading it myself.”

Benefits
- The greater the number of responses you receive, the greater becomes your ability to understand your audience(s) and discover revision directions.
- Usually a full class response session raises conflicting views and asks you to resolve them, encouraging you to think more deeply about your writing and writing goals. It is hard to remain complacent and overly-content under such scrutiny.
- When your teacher orchestrates the full class session, she can be sure that important points are covered, that each writer receives attention, that no writer dominates the discussion, and that her expertise is shared.
- By listening to and participating in full class sessions, you have a chance to discover which class peers you are most comfortable with so that you can seek them out in group work or out of class.
- Full class sharing makes efficient use of limited class time. Instead of seeing what only a few peers in a group are writing, over time you respond to the wealth and variety of writing from all class writers.

Drawbacks
- Few pieces of writing can be reviewed each session, and often even those are not reviewed in great depth.
- The responses you can receive may be highly contradictory and unsupported, making it difficult to respond to any of them.
- Your teacher may allow certain vocal students to dominate the discussion or she/he dominates the discussion. You feel you have no voice or don’t dare say anything.
- Response may become overly critical, each student trying to top the remark of a previous student.
- It may be expensive or complicated to copy and circulate the required samples of work for each workshop.
- You don’t get to know your teacher and your peers as well as you might wish.
- The teacher generally sets and controls the workshop agenda.
Activities
- As a class, draw up rules for your ideal full class workshops. Questions to consider:
  - How often will each class member get to share work?
  - Who will moderate the discussion? Remember, class members can successfully share the moderator’s role and learn a lot by doing so.
  - What are the logistics of copying and sharing work?
  - How do you assure that each class member contributes? Orally? With written comments?
  - How should the class deal with members who are constantly unprepared? How should peers phrase their responses to class members’ writing?
  - How will you assure that workshops don’t become too critical?
  - As a class, practice responding to sample writing provided by your teacher. After the ten minute response session, talk together about the roles each of you took; who was quiet, who talked, how did peers and teacher respond? Before starting your first workshop with your class members’ work, take a few minutes to remember this practice session and to review your workshop “rules.”
  - Your teacher will certainly want to model and direct activities during the first several workshops. After that, try substituting student facilitators, one to three individuals can be “today’s facilitator(s).” On days when the class is primarily responding to readings, students can ably provide successful leadership.

To Become a Productive Full Workshop Member
- Be prepared. Always read the workshop manuscripts ahead of time and write notes for the author.
- Don’t waste time. Volunteer responses quickly. Share your ideas in detail and then allow others to share theirs.
- Give each writer your attention. Don’t try to read a different manuscript than the one currently under discussion. Don’t do work for another class during workshop.
- Connect ideas. When a classmate clarifies an issue, try to connect to that point and move the discussion on.
- Be patient with class members whose personal habits bother you. Try to listen to what they are really saying and respond to those ideas, not to their personalities.
- Treat other writers the way you hope to be treated yourself.
- Keep track of your participation. It’s worth asking yourself if you’re talking enough or too much.
- Share your feelings. If workshop practices are bothering you, try to bring up issues individually with your teacher or during class discussion.
- Help keep the class on task. It’s easy to slip into small talk with your neighbors. Volunteer your writing-specific remarks to help get the discussion back where it should be: on the subject of writing.

Developing a Sequence of Small Group Responding Techniques for Writing Workshops
Planning your course means more than deciding on four or five interesting topics to write about. The issues of improving writing, responding to writing, and working in groups are all intertwined in a writing classroom. What do students know about writing, responding, and collaboration at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester? What do students need to know at the beginning, middle, and end of semester? Planning your course requires planning a sequence of responding techniques as carefully as your paper assignments.

Make Connections: What you do with small groups in your writing classes is inextricably connected to your ideas about the value of response and revision and how you enact those ideas in assignments and classroom activities. For instance, if you really don’t expect students to use their peers’ comments to revise or if students don’t know if or when the next revision is due and what you expect from the next revision, then they won’t use the peer responses, they won’t see any need to get them, and they won’t do anything except talk about the football game in their small group. Always take time to tell students why you ask them to work in small groups.

Provide Structure: In my experience, students always need structure, but not rigorous structure. Groups need to know what’s expected, need to feel their responses are valuable; yet they also need time to be people and not just students. Overly rigid structure doesn’t help students learn to talk like writers or learn about their audience. I generally set some “rules” early in the semester, with input from students, and enforce them firmly but with good humor. The rules I use are these:
- No apologies for poor writing.
- Elect a timer who ensures everyone has equal time on papers.
- Elect a leader who ensures everyone gets a chance to talk or is asked to talk.
- Read aloud and bring copies of drafts.
- Writer talks about draft before and after reading aloud.
- Positive responses only (if you’re used to “critique” and think you can’t revise unless someone points out what needs to be “fixed,” then it’s time to learn a new way).
- Pauses to re-read and think are okay.
- Write a memo to instructor after every workshop.

**Make Groups Responsible:** Students need to have specific “products” as a result of the group work. Keeping groups responsible for their time means 1) planning a written (handed-in) text, such as memos, 2) oral reports to the whole class about the group time, and/or 3) asking and expecting students to use the responses they received from their peers to revise.

**Provide Monitoring:** Students need occasions for writing and talking about what’s going on in their small groups. Talk to students at individual conferences, ask students to write to you and their group about what happened in one workshop, and over a period of time, ask students to write metaphors about their past and present small group experiences, etc.

**Early goals (first two months of semester):**
- getting acquainted, including time to talk “off-task” as well as getting comfortable talking about assigned topics
- responding positively and thoroughly (“I like it” is great, but they must say what they like and why)
- not responding to mechanical errors
- relying on each other more than instructor for helpful response
- true dialogue in the group, including everyone in group, no ganging up on the odd person out (the only male/female in the group, for instance); full participation, even if some members are quieter than others; listening to writer talk about text and the writer listening to and writing down responses from the group
- describing group’s response to text in memos to instructor
- discussing past group experiences and using them to understand how they will work in this group
- understanding why the writers need to stay in control of the response: consistently using “I” and “might” language instead of “you” and “should” language about someone else’s paper (“I get confused here” instead of “you should clarify this part”)
- learning a repertoire of content-related response techniques, all couched in positive or reader-response language, starting with center of gravity, what’s implied, say-back, etc. (mostly from Elbow and Belanoff’s *Sharing and Responding*).

**Middle of term goals (third month):**
- adding structure-focused response to repertoire of response techniques: says and does, stop-and-go, sentence outlining, believing and doubting, etc. See also “early and late response” questions in “Response Questions for Writing” in this Guide.
- describing conflicts in the group agenda and goals, describing roles members of the group take on in memos to the instructor, handling those conflicts in ways that help writers revise their papers (saying “let’s get back to our papers”)
- learning when and why some peer editing is helpful
- continuing all the goals from first two months

**Late in term goals (last month):**
- learning to respond to writer’s concerns (writer is responsible for choosing the kind of response is most appropriate for her text); learning to help a writer figure out what kind of response would be most helpful
- learning one or two more critique-like responding techniques: “If this were my paper, and I know it isn’t, but if it were, I’d...”
- making connections among writers’ needs and readers’ needs and how they are discussed in workshops
- planning for future small groups and future needs for response to writing (such as end of term self-evaluation questions about what they’ll do next year when assigned a paper)

**Ways to Ensure Your Small Groups Won’t “Work”**
- Respond so thoroughly and so forcefully (directively) to your students’ text that their small groups can’t possibly say anything different.
- Sit at the front of the room during small groups and offer no help when students seem to falter, or join a small group and do all the talking.
- Merely tell students to get into small groups and respond to their papers. Let the students figure out how to do that. Or give them 25 questions (preferably yes or no questions, such as “Does writer give you a clear thesis?”) to answer about each others’ drafts—encourage a workbook approach to workshops.
- Get upset and angry when the groups don’t follow instructions. Don’t bother asking them which directions confuse them, why they aren’t talking about drafts, etc.
Don’t try to get to know your students, just expect them to know each other and to care.
Don’t ever mention small groups and how they work, how they solve problems, or how people take on different roles in small groups.
Don’t ask students to relate their previous positive or negative experiences with small groups to your class.

Midterm Tune-up for Small Group Workshops

Two areas to assess and revise mid-semester are group process and responding technique. By mid-term students will have varying responses to small group work. Some of them will love it and take to it quickly. Others will resist and complain. Some groups will be talking so intently that they need much more time. Others will finish in minutes and spend the rest of the time looking bored. It’s useful to listen to both groups, either in class discussion or by having students write process memos describing what goes on in their small groups, and then to adjust or revamp the process, sometimes radically. In these discussions or memos attention to the process of workshopping papers rather than assessment of each other as workshop members is always most important. For example: “We seem to run out of things to say pretty fast.” Rather than “I’m the only person in my group who talks.”

Attention to the process

Attention to the process your small groups are using is good place to begin tuning up the group function.

- Are students reading their work out loud?
- Are they taking turns responding?
- Are they using a timer to make sure each essay and each speaker gets equal time?
- Are students taking time to write their responses down before they start talking?
- Do the groups need to be rearranged? If so, how?
- Do the students need to work in pairs for a draft, rather in larger groups?
- Do they need more specific instructions or guidelines?
- Do they need for the instructor to provide these guidelines or do they need to develop them themselves?

Attention to Responding Technique

Students need help responding to each other in ways that are analytical rather than qualitative. At this point a class discussion about the kinds of comments that are most helpful and the kinds of comments that go deep into the process of writing can get groups back on track. Try using guidelines that direct students away from words such as “like” or “don’t like” or “good” or “bad.” Encourage discussion among the readers in the group that ask and require answers to questions like, “Why did the author do this?” or “Why did so-and-so choose to emphasize that point” or “What color is the bird in the third paragraph?” or “What kinds of trees are at the edge of the field?” Obviously the questions will vary with the kind of assignment you have given. The point here is to ask the group to make comments and ask questions that open up the discussion about writing and that lead the author to think more deeply about her choices without overly shaping the evolving essay with praise or criticism.

Guidelines for In-Class Workshop of Draft 2

If you follow these steps, each paper should take about fifteen minutes to workshop. You will turn in copies of these drafts with your group members’ notes on them. I will use them to guide our next discussion about group workshops and the revision process.

- Each person will read his or her paper out loud.
- For the next five minutes members will write their responses in silence without discussion.
- For five minutes, more or less, group members will discuss their responses, taking turns and not interrupting each other.
- The author can ask clarifying questions of the group members after everyone has responded.
- Remember to use words that ask why, how, what, when and where, rather than words that praise or criticize like “good” or “bad.”

Try to include the following in your responses:

- A summary of what you think the author is trying to say or do in this piece of writing.
- Any and all questions you can think of. These can range from “How tall is Fred, anyway?” to “Why did you choose to start by telling the end of the story first?” Or “How are these ideas connected or related?”
- A description of the section of the essay that is most effective or clearly written and an explanation of why it is effective or clear.
Evaluating Groups
As educators are flooded with theories on small groups and the social construction of knowledge, many are thoroughly convinced that they should add at least one group assignment to their course requirements. The theorists are persuasive but rarely offer practical advice concerning the evaluation of group projects. Several pioneers in small group studies, however, suggest that initially the evaluation process is not dissimilar from individual evaluation: let your students know specifically what you expect from them and how you intend to gauge their progress. When assigning a project like a group website, which entails individual writing within the context of group work, students need to know the requirements for their individual contributions to the site, as well as the parameters of the final product. Peer evaluation should contribute to the evaluation of group performance, so students as evaluators need to know in advance the standards by which they are to judge their fellow group members and by which they in turn will be judged. This should help them to be conscious of their own contributions to the group dynamic.

Several studies argue that small groups or learning teams are more effective when they receive immediate feedback on group work. This is especially important for learning teams in composition classes, because writing is inherently an individual activity. Several small group advocates warn that groups asked to produce a written product will often meet only long enough to outline a divide-and-conquer strategy, bypassing the interaction necessary for group cohesion. One method for providing feedback is to require that groups present a proposal for their site design which is then shared with the entire class. They have the opportunity to receive feedback from other peer groups as well as feedback from the teacher. (One byproduct of this exercise is that small groups develop a sense of pride in their group through competition with other groups. Larry Michaelsen argues that the single most effective factor in creating group cohesion is the danger of an outside threat—competition.) Another method for monitoring group progress and providing immediate feedback is through group process memos which outline the progress of the group and group dynamics. Finally, though group grades must be assigned. It can be difficult to get an accurate impression of each student’s contribution to the final product because even if you ask the students to assign one another grades, if they have the option of giving everyone the same grade, they are likely to do just that. Few people want to look petty and rat out their friends. So, some small group advocates suggest requiring students to rank the participation of group members. If they must report on the participation of group members, but are not allowed to give them the same number of points, students are forced to admit who did the most work (and who did the least). I originally expected lots of resistance to this type of evaluation, but I discovered that it relieves social pressure and makes students honestly evaluate group dynamics, including their own participation. I have found very little discrepancy among the peer evaluations; everyone feels the same pressure to be honest. Those who received poor participation evaluations from their peers expected to receive it and evaluated themselves accordingly. For a sense of accountability, these evaluations are not anonymous, but they are private. This is the evaluation worksheet that I give students on the day that projects are presented:

Group Participation
For this grade, you must rank your group members. You may not give everyone 5 Points. Studies show that in group projects it is almost impossible for everyone to do the same amount of work. The highest score that you may give any one group member is 10 points. I will consider all of these ballots as well as your process memos when I determine group grades.

Your Group Grade is 30% of your Total Individual Project Grade; 70% of your Project Grade will be based upon your individual writing.

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TOTAL POSSIBLE GROUP POINTS: __________________
Once students have ranked one another and it is clear who did the most and least work in each group, how does that translate into a grade? I choose to grade individual writing and weight it as 70% of their final Project grade. I then assign each Project an overall grade and use the peer evaluations to determine how much each student contributed to that final product. Using the ranking system, students may receive 1-10 points from their peers. After averaging the peer evaluations, students receive the following: those who rank 6-10, receive 100%; the full 30 points of the group grade; 4-5 points receive 75%; 2-3 receive 50%; and 1 receives 25%. This system emphasizes both individual written contributions and group participation. A student with C (75) writing who receives an A for group participation by really contributing to the group’s creativity, initiative, presentation, visual media, ads, page layout etc. would receive a B (85). On the other hand, a student with A (95) writing who missed group meetings and did little more than hand over individual writing for inclusion in the Project would get a C- (73).

When students realize in advance that group participation has the potential to alter project grades by more than a letter grade, they take their group participation a little more seriously. Ideally, this forewarning would prompt all students to strive for exemplary group participation. Although that is a fantasy, I allow students a loop-hole. When they are filling out their group participation evaluations (and not before—I don’t want anyone to feel pressured to opt for this loophole), I tell them that if they genuinely believe that no one in their group did any more than another person, then they may give everyone the same grade. However, they must qualify their evaluations and explain on the back of the form what each person contributed to the group performance. So far, no one has taken me up on this offer. It appears that someone always does just a little more than everyone else. Groups seem to be satisfied with an almost equal rating of 6/6/4/4/4.

**Suggested Readings:**
—-. *Designing Effective Group Activities: Lessons for Classroom Teaching and Faculty Development.* (1997).

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**Additional Suggestions**

**First Day/First Week Writing Prompts**

Every teacher of ENC 1101 and ENC 1102 needs to get a writing sample from all her students as early as possible during the first week of classes. One of the practical reasons is to guide students with severe mechanical or organizational problems to the Reading/Writing Center. The other reason is to learn as much as possible about your students and their attitudes toward and experiences with writing and reading. As homogenous as our student body appears to be, our first-year students still vary widely in their literacy backgrounds. And every set of 18 or 25 students will have a slightly different combination of those backgrounds. Only sloppy teachers would assume one class of students is just like all the others.

A student “profile” is also a good idea in addition to a first day writing sample. A student profile asks for short answers only, usually lists and facts, so it can’t substitute for a writing sample because it doesn’t give you any insight into a student’s writing abilities. It might include these: name, address, telephone number, email address, other courses taking this semester, computer experience and access, year in college, age, hometown, high school activities, college activities, jobs, interests, hobbies, pets, favorite academic subjects, etc. In 1102 you want to ask whether they took 1101 and what activities they remember from 1101. You don’t want to ask for high school grades, college grades or GPAs, SAT or ACT scores or anything that indicates their past performance in courses. All students deserve the right to start “fresh” with every teacher. Below are some possible questions to pose during the first week of class. They are designed to illicit long answers which give you a chance to see students’ fluency, confidence, organizational abilities, and mechanical skills. They could spill over into prompts for drafts of literacy narratives or serve as journal prompts for the first several weeks of class.

- Describe yourself as a writer and/or reader.
- List all the kinds of writing you’ve done at jobs, in high school, for personal reasons, in other college courses.
- What kinds of writing and reading do you enjoy most? least? Why?
- What are your expectations for this class? What kind of class do you think this one will be?
- What are your goals for your work this semester? What do you need to work on as a writer?