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A New Perspective on Why Small Groups Do and Don't Work

Peter Smagorinsky and Pamela K. Fly

Since we began teaching, we both have been great proponents of using small groups in the English class. In our own teaching, students have worked in small groups for a variety of purposes: to work



on many aspects of writing, to analyze short stories, to play vocabulary games, to produce plays, and to engage in other activities with the support of their peers. Like many language-arts educators at all levels, we have found that small-group activities increase levels of interaction among students, enable students to teach and learn from each other, and promote a healthy social climate in the classroom.

We have also found, however, that small groups “just don’t seem to work” for some teachers. We all know of colleagues who say, “I tried that once, and it was a disaster,” or “Small groups only give kids a license to goof off.” Upon hearing these comments, we would always think, “The problem isn’t with small groups; it’s with the way you run them.” These teachers could have more success, we believed, if only they would allow kids to work on more challenging and appropriate tasks, if they would provide better incentives

for working harmoniously, or if they would supervise the group work more effectively. We have spent many hours developing ideas on how to set up and manage small groups in order to make them work well. Like many educators who have advocated small groups, we have believed that managerial considerations strongly affect the ways in which small groups operate.

Yet, we also knew that no matter how effectively some teachers set up small groups, the groups floundered or got hopelessly off task. Management, it became clear, was only part of the story. As Anne DiPardo and Sarah Freedman have pointed out, “We know little about precisely why groups work when they do, or perhaps more importantly, what accounts for their failures” (1987, 2).

Our uncertainty about the factors that affect small-group success led us to undertake a classroom investigation that tried to answer some of our questions about effective small-group process. The research, which examined the talk of students engaged in small-group discussions of literature, has given us a better understanding of “why groups work when they do.” (See Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith [in press] and Smagorinsky and Fly [1993] for detailed reports on the research.) We examined tape recordings of high-school sophomores discussing “coming-of-age” stories in two settings: first in a teacher-led discussion of one story from a course anthology, and then in small-group discussions of a second story from the same anthology. Our purpose was to examine the extent to which the patterns of talk established by the teachers in the initial discussions affected the ways in which students talked when discussing the story with each other.



The study involved a limited number of teachers and students, so we must be cautious in generalizing from the results. From our analysis of the transcripts, however, it seems that the behavior of teachers in class discussions has a great deal to do with the success of students working independently. In other words, assuming that the groups are set up and managed in more or less the same ways, the patterns of discussion established by teachers *leading up to* small-group sessions seem to influence the ability of students to talk on their own. The following discussion-leading techniques seemed to facilitate successful small-group interactions: (1) prompting students to generate a contextual framework to guide interpretation; (2) prompting students to elaborate their responses; (3) building on student contributions to generate questions; and (4) making the process of analysis explicit. The following sections illustrate each of these techniques with segments from classroom discussions.

Prompting Students to Generate a Contextual Framework to Guide Interpretation

In their whole-class discussions, all of the teachers strove to provide a broad context through which to interpret the story. One teacher provided that context himself, sharing with his students lengthy personal experiences that illustrated the plight of the literary characters. Often these personal connections were riveting and relevant to the literary dilemma. Teachers who provided this context for the students, however, did not appear to help students learn how to generate relevant personal examples themselves. Here, for instance, a teacher posed questions about the behavior of a character and then elaborated a student response into a hypothetical situation that helped illuminate the character's situation.

Teacher: Rachel, what happens after he jumps into the water?

Rachel: He saves the girl.

Teacher: Is it an easy saving?

Rachel: No, because the current pulls them under.

Teacher: That is described in great detail. Why do you suppose the author describes the saving in such great detail?

Student: [inaudible]

Teacher: It has to be arduous for anything to be important. It has to be difficult. For example, if it were easy to play the guitar, we would all be Eric

Clapton. But all of us probably have sat down with either our guitar or somebody else's guitar. The first thing you find out is that it sort of hurts and it is hard to keep the frets down. So you get one chord and you struggle for a while, like row, row your boat. You got to change it, and it is difficult. Now, if it is a matter of just hopping off a two foot bridge into three feet of water and saying, don't be silly, you're all right honey, that is not going to be something that changes him very much. But in the act of saving itself, one particular thing happens between the two people. Can you remember what that is?

Presumably, the reference to a rock-and-roll icon will build on students' interests and help them see the connection between their own worlds and those of the characters in the story. Yet when teachers generated an appropriate context without engaging students in the process, they did not appear to help their students gain the ability to produce such contexts for themselves. Here, for instance, is a complete episode in the small-group discussion of this teacher's students:

Ellen: [Reads from assignment sheet] "What characteristics does the protagonist have at the beginning of the story that you would call immature? Give examples and explain why they are immature."

Betty: I don't know.

Judy: Wait, I forgot the story. Let me get my book right here.

Ellen: I think that at the beginning of the story, he thinks that to be mature, he's going to be six feet tall, he's going to have arms of steel, and he thinks he's going to be in control.

Judy: He watches TV too much.

Ellen: And he thinks he's rebelling by eating grape seeds just because his mother is not there.

Ginny: Good answer.

Ellen: Somebody else talk. (pause) Does anyone else have any more reasons why he is immature?

Betty: Nope.

Episodes of this length and depth were typical in the discussions of the students whose teachers provided the broad context of interpretation. Their interpretations appeared to serve the purpose of generating an acceptable answer and then moving on to the next question. Although the teacher made a great effort to provide a model for how to generate a context from personal experience, when left on their own students did not appear to know how to do so.

When teachers used questioning techniques that *prompted the students* to generate a context to frame the story, the students were far more capable of producing a relevant framework in their small-group discussions. In the following excerpt from one whole-class discussion, the teacher pushed students to provide a conceptual context through which to interpret the literary character's experience:

Patsy: He thought it was so mature to, well, he was eating grapes and staying up late with, he was eating grapes and grape seeds and staying up late and watching TV without his mother's approval.

Teacher: OK, eating grapes and seeds and a couple of other examples. He was staying up late.

Patsy: Yeah.

Teacher: And he was also . . .

Patsy: Watching TV.

Teacher: And watching TV when told not to. And these fall into the category of what?

Patsy: Huh?

Teacher: These all have something in common.

Patsy: Well, disobeying.

Teacher: OK. He was disobeying his mother. All right. Now what can you do with this? In other words, what are you trying to tell us by bringing up these points?

Patsy: That he thought he was mature by disobeying his mother. He thought it made him a more mature person and older by doing things he wasn't supposed to do.

Teacher: Thought he was mature through these acts. OK, and what does Patsy think? Do you agree with it?

Patsy: What? No.

Teacher: Why not?

Patsy: He was just showing how immature he is by doing that.

Teacher: And what criterion of a definition of maturity are you using to make this judgment? Why is this, you are saying that this is, in fact, immature even though he thought he was mature. That is what you are saying, right?

Patsy: Yes.

Teacher: Why? You are saying he is immature because of something and that *because* is your definition. And what is it about your definition that allows you to make this judgment?

In their small-group discussions, students of this teacher worked to establish a similar sort of conceptual interpretive framework:

Veronica: The protagonist was very insecure.

Kay: Why is he insecure?

Hope: Why is he insecure? Because he stayed home all the time and didn't want to go on this trip.

Kay: So that was immature?

Tammy: That was insecure.

Hope: Insecure which is immature.

Tammy: Yeah.

Kay: Why is immaturity insecurity?

Tammy: [reads from assignment sheet] ". . . that you would call immature?"

Kay: Why is insecure immature? By staying home, is that immature?

Tammy: No, he had no friends.

Kay: No friends is insecure?

Hope: No, he's insecure and insecurity is immaturity.

Kay: The second question asks, "Explain why . . ."

Tammy: You have to know yourself and he doesn't; therefore he's insecure.

Hope: Insecure means no self-knowledge.

Tammy: Yeah.

Kay: OK, he had no self-knowledge. Now, why is that immature?

Tammy: Because he was too protected.

Hope: It's immature because . . .

Kay: He was protected.

Hope: Yeah. He was 17, he was afraid to go out. Well, actually . . .

Kay: He was old enough to know . . .

Hope: Right.

Kay: He spent his life at home.

Hope: He was never really out.

Veronica: Maybe he was a hermit. I don't know why. He just like stayed at home with his family. I feel sorry for him.

Hope: He's one of those people you don't want to know. How is no self-knowledge immature?

Tammy: Let me explain this one. You see like, no self-knowledge, that leads to . . . I don't know.

Kay: He has no idea what the outside world is.

Tammy: You have to know yourself, and by knowing yourself, you know your limits.

Hope: Yeah.

Simply *modeling* an interpretive strategy, then, does not appear to be effective in teaching students how to apply it; teachers must saturate the classroom with prompts for students to generate their own interpretive framework for analyzing lit-

erature in order to get them to do so on their own. The teacher in the excerpt just given never explicitly told students that he was teaching them a strategy, yet they seem to have picked it up through routine participation in such exchanges.

Prompting Students to Elaborate their Responses

A second effective discussion-leading technique was for teachers to prompt their students to develop insufficient responses. One teacher, for instance, had a method of repeating student statements in the form of a question in order to prompt them to elaborate:

Jane: . . . it seems like she is just this mother figure. He is kind of scared of her.

Teacher: He is kind of scared of his grandmother?

Jane: Yeah. Like she is kind of turning against him.

Teacher: She is turning against him?

A method such as this appeared quite effective in getting students to develop their own self-prompts for elaborating; students of teachers who demonstrated some method of prompting elaboration engaged in longer, more detailed analysis of the literature in their small groups than did students of teachers who elaborated student responses themselves. Each teacher had a unique way of providing such prompts; no particular method seemed more effective than others. The point that stood out was that teachers who prompted students to elaborate, rather than taking over the responsibility of elaboration themselves, seemed to provide

students with procedures for discussing literature independent of the teacher's influence.

Building on Student Contributions to Generate Questions

Another effective discussion-leading technique was for teachers to engage in what Martin Nystrand and Adam Gamoran (1991) have called *uptake*; that is, to pose questions that build on student interpretations and serve as elaboration prompts. Teachers whose preconceived questions guided and structured their discussions did not appear to empower students to guide their own discussions well. "Uptake" sequences such as reported in the following excerpt appeared to help students generate longer episodes in their small-group discussions:

Larry: You don't have a male figure if you are a man, and you don't have a reference because you see things a little differently because men and women have different . . .

Teacher: Yeah, he has just got a grandmother and an aunt in the house, and he has just lost his mother. It doesn't seem like he ever had a father around. So you are saying you wouldn't call it immaturity? You would call it . . .

Fred: Innocence.

Larry: No. I think it is more what is going on in the house.

Teacher: Just a reflection of the life, the way he has been growing up?

In this sequence the teacher is going with the flow of the discussion. Rather than setting the di-



rection of the discussion through posing predetermined questions, he is basing his questions on student interpretations in order to get them to elaborate on or defend their ideas. Such a questioning method appeared highly effective in getting students to engage in extensive discussion in their small-group sessions.

Making the Process of Analysis Explicit

A final effective discussion-leading strategy was for the teacher to make the process of analysis explicit by calling attention to procedures for interpreting literature, as in the following sequence:

Teacher: I think we assume they must [have four children] because she is supporting them, right?

Chorus: Yeah.

Teacher: There is something else that we need to ask.

Sally: What happened to the uncle?

Teacher: We don't get any information about the boy's father or the grandfather, for that matter. Any of the men, we don't learn anything about in the story. But there is another question from the beginning, at least about his behavior.

Students of teachers who made the process of interpretation explicit by pointing out the need to pose questions, to make generalizations, to search for evidence, to refer to a broader conceptual framework had longer, more detailed small-group discussions than did students of teachers who simply modeled the interpretive behavior.

Conclusion

This research relies on a limited number of teachers and students, and so we cannot regard it as conclusive. It does help generate hypotheses, however, about why small groups work when they do, and what accounts for their failure. It appears from the discussions analyzed here that the success of small groups is related to the overall discussion patterns that govern the classrooms in which they take place. This hypothesis finds support in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), whose theories centered on the importance of social and cultural influences on learning. Drawing on Vygotsky's work, Jerome Bruner (1975) coined the term "scaffolding" to describe the manner in which a teacher (who can be an adult or peer) supports a person's early learning experiences and gradually withdraws support as the learner becomes more independent. In the research we've reported, all of the teachers were *attempting* to provide a scaffold of

support for student learning. Effective instructional scaffolding, however, appears to involve a dynamic interaction between students and teacher and not simply the modeling of a learning process or the presentation of information. Teachers whose students engaged in fruitful small-group activities *cultivated student expertise*, rather than issuing expert opinions.

Since conducting this research, we have come to regard small groups quite differently than we did for many years. We now see them as an extension of the continuum of discussions enacted during the school year. Their success seems dependent on the prevailing language of the classroom, which makes it unlikely that a teacher whose talk dominates the classroom can use them effectively. Teachers who have struggled with small groups might benefit from examining their own discussion-leading styles in order to make their classes more flexible and interactive; teachers who have had success with small groups might be more cautious in recommending them to others. In all cases, the research suggests that teachers need to attend to the total environment they create in their classrooms and to look at particular instructional methods and classroom episodes as they relate to learning and instruction as a whole.

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