CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING AND PEER WRITING PROGRAMMES

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ABSTRACT   This article argues that peer writing programmes based on co-operative learning theory have the potential to enhance students' writing development. It examines to what extent peer writing programmes can be considered co-operative. The co-operation theories of Johnson and Johnson and Damon and Phelps are drawn on, particularly Johnson and Johnson's theory of positive interdependence and Damon and Phelps' three-pronged model of peer writing programmes: peer tutoring; co-operative learning, and peer collaboration. These co-operation theories are then used to critique five peer writing programmes from New Zealand and overseas. Results suggest that few peer writing programmes foster positive interdependence and most do not go beyond the peer tutoring model. Therefore, teachers need to develop ways of implementing a co-operative approach within peer writing programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Co-operative learning theory provides a strong educational rationale for the inclusion of peer writing programmes in New Zealand schools. Fully implemented, a co-operative learning programme has the potential to enhance many students' writing development. Many educationalists now recognise that the fostering of co-operative learning during writing tasks is a key factor in enhancing this development. That is not to say co-operative writing programmes are the only avenue to improving students' writing skills, or that enhancing writing development is the only benefit to be gained from a co-operative learning approach. However, a peer writing programme based on a framework of co-operative learning theory is a potent tool for improving students' writing.

Mention the need for peer writing programmes in classrooms and many language teachers will nod in agreement. Since the early 1980s peer writing programmes have become increasingly popular in New Zealand schools, just as they have in educational institutions throughout much of America (Nystrand, 1990). In implementing these programmes, teachers may have a variety of educational objectives, from developing social interaction opportunities to improving students' editing skills. However, peer writing programmes are often predicated on theories of co-operative learning (Gere, 1985). Arising out of an increasing recognition that learning occurs within social contexts, co-operation theory argues that by co-operating as a group, peers can create a mutually supportive community of writers. Within such a community, different learning styles can be catered for, as students are no longer restricted to the teacher's learning methods: they can develop their own in conjunction with their peers. Co-operation between students is seen as a central component of the writing process. Peer writing programmes are an ideal means by which to foster this co-operative learning (Bruffee, 1993). Indeed, it seems that some language teachers assume that simply by implementing a peer writing programme they will foster co-operative learning. Yet, it is not as simple as this, because co-operative learning is an educational theory requiring a full understanding of its essential components

before teachers can successfully implement it in the classroom and reap its benefits.

This paper has two aims. First, it attempts to link the phrase "co-operative learning" back to educational theory in a way that will be useful for language teachers. Second, it attempts to critique peer writing programmes by asking: How co-operative are most peer writing programmes, according to two different models of co-operation theory?

CO-OPERATIVE LEARNING THEORIES AND THEIR EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

Johnson and Johnson's research on the benefits of co-operative learning provides a justification for including co-operative-based peer writing programmes within the classroom. Moreover, their theory of interdependence can act as a powerful tool with which to critique peer writing programmes. Johnson and Johnson (1995) claim that, for group work to be successful, people must develop social interdependence: individuals must feel that their own fate is influenced by the actions of others. This interdependence is of two types: competition (negative) and co-operation (positive). In positive interdependence, also known as co-operative learning, group members believe that they cannot succeed unless all other group members succeed also. Individualism is the third option, where individuals feel no sense of interdependence (Johnson and Holubec, 1994a), as shown in Figure 1.
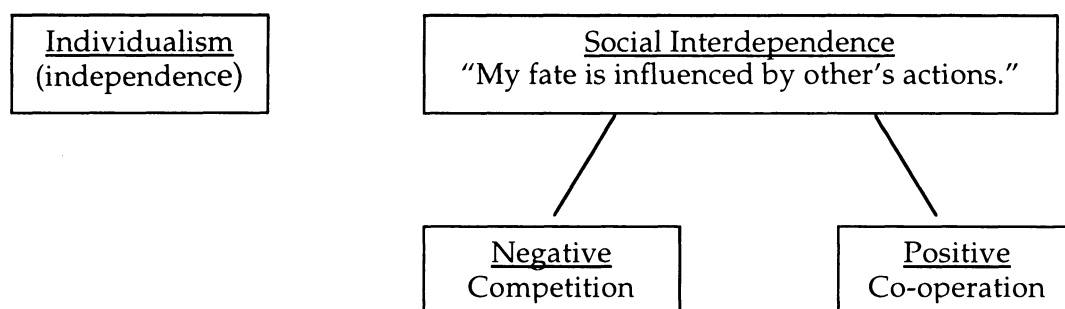

Figure 1: Johnson and Johnson's Interdependence Theory (1995)

After critiquing over 630 studies on group learning, Johnson and Johnson (1995) found that under a broad range of conditions, co-operative efforts result in higher achievement and greater productivity than competitive or individualistic efforts. In co-operative groups, individuals feel responsible for helping their group meet its goal. Yet this positive interdependence seems to go beyond motivating people in the group to work harder: "It creates the conditions for the development of new insights and understandings through promotive interaction" (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p. 193). Within this rich learning environment, co-operative learning also increases the requirement for problem-solving and critical thinking activity (Johnson & Johnson, 1995). This is pertinent to the teaching of writing, as writing is a generative task requiring new ideas and understandings. For students who experience difficulty generating ideas at the draft stage (the "blank page" scenario), a co-operative learning environment may provide the stimulus necessary to overcome this frustrating problem. With these educational benefits, it seems that we should attempt to foster positive interdependence within peer writing programmes.

Johnson and Johnson claim that, within a school context, simply putting students in a group and expecting them to be co-operative does not work. Fostering positive interdependence requires certain conditions within the group. It requires:

- a shared goal that all members must work towards
- a co-operative, non-competitive environment
- considerable face-to-face interaction
- the frequent use of relevant interpersonal skills.

(Johnson & Holubec, 1994a, pp. 5-7)

Face-to-face Interaction	Shared Goals		Greater productivity Group works harder

What we need for Positive Interdependence → Higher achievement of desired goal

Frequent use of Inter-personal Skills	Co-operative Work Environment	Personal responsibility to meet group goal

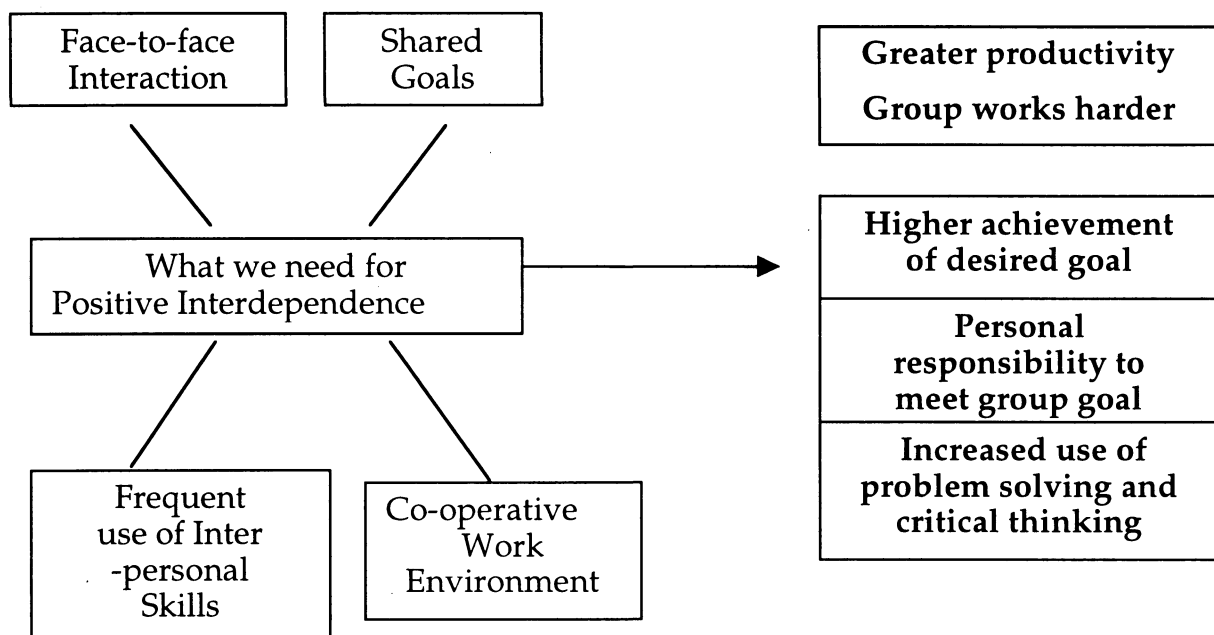Increased use of problem solving and critical thinking

Figure 2: Positive Interdependence (adapted from Johnson & Johnson, 1995)

To begin with, the teacher has an important role in establishing these conditions. As Johnson et al. (1994b) note, co-operative learning must begin in a structured, formal way before it can become an informal part of classroom activity. Formal co-operative learning requires a teacher-directed approach. The teacher explains the task and the positive interdependence being focused on (say, no put-downs). The task itself is joint, so it cannot be completed without every member of the group contributing. The teacher monitors students' learning and intervenes in the group to provide task assistance and evaluate students' learning. When the groups have had ample practice with co-operative learning, they can take a more informal approach. Informal co-operative learning also includes a joint goal, but it occurs within temporary, ad-hoc groups lasting from a few minutes to a whole lesson (Johnson et al., 1994a).

Johnson and Johnson's model of co-operative learning gives us a broad theoretical base from which to critique peer writing programmes. For a more specific theory relating to peer writing we need to explore social constructivism and Damon and Phelps' (in McCarthy & Phelps, 1995) three-pronged model of peer writing programmes. As a paradigm, social constructivism began during the 1980s and was highly influenced by the theories of Vygotsky. Within this view,

knowledge is formed through social interaction. We learn by moving from the interpsychological plane (social, between people) to the intrapsychological plane (within the individual) (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994, p. 6). Social context becomes crucial, as it determines the individual's learning environment. Yet this model does not ignore the individual's meaning-making process; rather it suggests that this process is dependent on the social context in which learning occurs (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1993, p. 74). The rationale for peer writing is based on the belief that, as learning is social in nature, students ought to be provided with opportunities to interact with others. As McCarthy and McCahon state: "The purpose of peer instruction is to make the implicit nature of social learning explicit by encouraging interactive learning within social settings" (1995, p. 18). Learning is seen as internalised social conversations, so "writing can be perceived as the re-emergence of this internalised interaction" (McCarthy & McCahon, 1995, p. 18).

In discussing peer interaction from a social constructivist viewpoint, McCarthy and McCahon utilise Damon and Phelps' model of peer writing. Damon and Phelps claim that there are three categories of peer instruction: peer tutoring, co-operative learning, and peer collaboration (McCarthy & McCahon, p. 20) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions of Peer Groups

	Task	Power Dynamics	Interactions
Peer Tutoring	Independent	Low on equality	One-way
Co-operative Learning	Multiple contributions to one task	High on equality	Some multi-directional interactions
Peer Collaboration	Joint task	High on equality	Multi-directional

In peer tutoring one student is the "knowledgeable other" and acts as the tutor with direct influence over the other's writing. In this sense, the relationship is low on equality as the tutor has authority over the students' writing. Interactions are one-way because knowledge and advice is seen to travel from the tutor to the student. Thus, the tutor becomes the judge rather than a peer. The student has an individual task to accomplish, and the tutor helps her/him accomplish it. In co-operative learning there is task-interdependence but individual accountability is maintained. Each student has some responsibility for the group text and for her/his individual text. For example, a group may produce a booklet and each student writes one part of it. Dialogue between members is necessary to accomplish the task, so some multi-directional interactions occur. Each member has a contribution to make towards the group task, and each person's knowledge is valued in equal measure. In this sense, equality is high. In peer collaboration the whole writing process is shared, and the product is considered the property of all in the group. Multi-directional interactions become crucial, as the achievement of the writing task is dependent upon free-flowing dialogue between all group members.

Table 2: Parallels Between Johnson and Johnson and Damon and Phelps

Damon and Phelps	Johnson and Johnson
Peer Tutoring	Mainly individualism
Co-operative Learning	Mainly positive interdependence Some individualism
Peer Collaboration	Positive interdependence

As can be seen in the comparison shown in Table 2, we can draw *tentative* parallels between this model of peer writing and Johnson and Johnson's theory. These parallels are not intended to somehow blend the two distinct theories together. Rather, they simply highlight aspects that the two theories have in common. The peer tutoring model relates broadly to Johnson and Johnson's notion of individualism. The one-way interactions and task independence of the peer tutoring model does not promote social interdependence between the tutor and the student. Co-operative learning mainly involves positive interdependence, with a shared writing goal, face-to-face interaction and the frequent use of interpersonal skills. However, unlike peer collaboration, co-operative learning may involve some individualism because it is possible (though certainly not ideal) for a student to complete her/his task with minimal involvement in the group. After initially meeting as a group to decide on the writing task, each student could go away and write their part of the task independently. By contrast, in the peer collaboration model this is not possible as the entire writing task is done collaboratively. This, and the multi-directional nature of the interactions in a peer collaboration model, ensures that it fits Johnson and Johnson's definition of positive interdependence.

To examine Damon and Phelps' three-pronged theory, McCarthy and McCahon (1995) set up a class where all three types of learning occurred, and then compared them, based on the features of social constructivist theory. They found that each of the three categories was appropriate for different tasks and different types of student groups. For example, when one student needed help on an individual task and another student was able to give it then peer tutoring was appropriate. Yet McCarthy and McCahon caution against the overuse of the peer tutoring model. They note that peer tutoring is not appropriate if teachers wish to foster a sense of group cohesion and collaboration; co-operative learning and peer collaboration models are necessary to achieve this. Which of the three categories do most peer writing programmes fall into, and to what extent do they foster co-operative learning, as Johnson and Johnson define it? What follows is a critique of five peer writing programmes based on these central questions.

PEER WRITING PROGRAMMES: A CRITIQUE

Robert Neale

Although Neale's (1991) work is not informed by any co-operative theory, it *appears* that he opens this piece with a strong statement in favour of co-operative learning. He notes that you cannot teach writing. You can, however, "set up an environment in which your students will want to teach themselves or each other" (Neale, 1991, p. 122). Yet Neale does not develop this interesting statement into a pedagogy or method of teaching writing. In this respect, Neale has missed an exciting opportunity. This example is typical of the entire chapter: he raises some pertinent points or issues and then does not consider how a truly collaborative

approach could be used to implement them. For example, he notes that it is crucial to provide writers with a real audience and to bait them with the idea of publication (Neale, 1991, p. 123). Yet he does not consider how a group writing approach could provide the context for a real audience of peers and also provide writers with a ready-made publishing group.

Neale astutely notes that pupils should not be writing for an audience of one: the teacher. He claims that the teacher is seen as more knowledgeable than the student. As the student-teacher relationship is not equal, going to the teacher with your writing is a formidable experience (Neale, 1991, p. 124). Students, however, can provide a real audience of equals for each other. In this respect, Neale appears to meet one of Damon and Phelps' (1989) criteria for co-operative learning and peer collaboration: peer interactions must be high on equality. However, I do not think that the peer writing techniques he advocates will actually promote equality between peers or quality feedback about writing. Neale advocates a peer editing technique where students, in pairs, scrutinise and comment on each other's writing. The editing begins with very specific questions to answer and discrete jobs to do. Presumably the teacher gives these. Neale claims, in this way, even students of very different ability benefit, as the more advanced students learn by articulating what they already know. He stresses that, within this process, the teacher "remains an essential catalyst in the whole reaction" (Neale, 1991, p. 124). This seems to contradict, somewhat, his opening statement about teachers being unable to actually teach writing.

Neale elaborates on this peer editing technique in the appendix, where he gives six examples of peer-editing techniques to use with classes (1991, p. 133-40). The basic exercise involves a four step process: proof reading (checking spelling, conventions and placing a question mark alongside unclear statements); underlining the crucial part of the writing (for example, the thesis statement in an essay) and evaluating how well it works, and how it could be improved; underlining effective words or phrases and explaining why you chose them; and adding any further comments. Notice several assumptions that these exercises make about peer response. First, it only occurs *after* an individual has written a draft: it is limited to the responding phase of the writing process. McCarthy and McCahon (1995) note that this is a limitation of many peer writing approaches. Second, one individual comments on another individual's work. There are no shared aims or tasks here. From Johnson and Johnson's perspective, this puts the task largely into the "individualistic" category as there is only a very limited sense of interdependence, no shared fate and certainly no positive interdependence. Damon and Phelps would place the task into the peer tutoring category, rather than the co-operative learning or peer collaboration categories, because it involves one student taking on the role of the knowledgeable other almost as the teacher for that period of time.

A third assumption is that the feedback should be written down. If verbal dialogue is not included in the feedback, it is very difficult to create a co-operative learning environment. Johnson and Johnson note that without face-to-face verbal interaction it is difficult to foster positive interdependence. Neale's editing process, therefore, does not seem to be informed by co-operative learning theory. While it may be a useful task for students to undertake, I do not feel that it takes advantage of all the benefits which peers can reap from sharing the writing process.

Richard R. Adler

Adler's (1989) manual, *Writing Together,* is essentially a "how-to" for writers and teachers wanting to implement a peer writing programme. The manual is divided into the various stages in the writing process, and at most stages there is a section dedicated to peer writing strategies. In the pre-writing phase, Adler (1989) recommends that students share ideas in a group brainstorm and hold discussions in small groups. He advocates several strategies in the revision stages. In one, the writer asks the peer to read the draft and then orally raise any questions. In another, the student seeks help from a peer who is better at something than the researcher. This is analogous to the peer tutoring model put forward by Damon and Phelps. The peer helper becomes the knowledgeable other who sends knowledge to the less knowledgeable peer. Equality is low, as the helper's views are valued above those of the student. However, within this context peer tutoring is not as problematic as it is in Neale's (1991) peer-response programme where it was the only method implemented. Adler offers a variety: peer tutoring is just one. Other methods include a check and question mark system, where students place a tick in the margin for one error, and a question mark for parts they are unclear about, and then discuss it with the author. This seems very similar to Neale's first stage of the editing process but it has the benefit of allowing verbal face-to-face interaction between the two peers.

The great majority of the peer exercises which Adler describes involve two people rather than a small group of peers. Yet, in order to implement co-operative learning or peer collaboration, we need a *group*: three or more people who interact. In addition, during the pre-writing stage he advocates small group discussion and brainstorming. I believe that this group focus at the early stages is important, and Adler's programme is one of the only ones to allow this to occur. McCarthy and McCahon (1995) would also applaud this method because it allows for peer involvement at the pre- and post- writing stages. However, it does not allow for peer involvement during the actual writing stage, and it certainly does not advocate shared writing tasks ie. tasks where the group produces a piece of writing together. Therefore, although Adler's programme encourages face-to-face interaction and the use of interpersonal skills at the pre- and post-writing phase it cannot be considered truly co-operative, in Johnson and Johnson's terms.

Damon and Phelps (1989) could argue that much of Adler's programme actually remains at the peer tutoring level, where one student needs assistance with an individual writing task and the other student provides that assistance. The latter becomes the knowledgeable person whose opinions carry the voice of authority. Adler also provides no information about how students can go from working in pairs to becoming a community of writers, which he claims happened during the programme. Therefore, he implies that this community somehow developed naturally from undertaking his peer exercises. This seems unlikely. These tasks were mainly designed for pairs, and if Adler wants to encourage a community of writers he needs to develop exercises appropriate for a small group.

The Peer Response Project

The Peer Response Project (1997) was an entirely Internet-run writing programme for undergraduates. Students wrote a first draft of their writing and then put it on the Internet for other students to critique via a peer response form. At the end of the course each student published a cyberfolio that included the critical responses that helped shape the final product. The cyberfolio is a strength of this particular

peer writing programme, because it makes the writing process explicit to other readers. Students can see how their feedback has shaped other people's writing. Further, it offers students a real audience of their own peers, rather than simply being handed to the teacher for marking.

A further strength of this programme is the inclusion of a chat room where all writers can converse. This is the next best thing to face-to-face conversation with peers, as students are able to hold group dialogue sessions over the Internet. Johnson and Johnson stress the importance of verbal interaction during peer learning exercises. Indeed, they believe face-to-face interaction is crucial for the development of positive interdependence. It must be pointed out, however, that a chat room cannot replace verbal dialogue. I would question the ability of *any* Internet writing programme to provide the same opportunity for peer interaction. Face-to-face discussions cannot occur, and every interaction is written, not oral. This inevitably places restrictions on the rate and type of interactions that can occur. There is no opportunity to create a co-operative work environment, another condition for positive interdependence, as students can work individually from their own personal computer. Also, in this programme the chat room is entirely optional: students can simply fill out the response form and never have any contact with the person that they are critiquing. Therefore, from Johnson and Johnson's perspective, this programme does not foster positive interdependence.

This programme also has other restrictions. It is run more as a peer tutoring programme than as an attempt at collaborative learning. Like Neale's programme, this one does not offer any opportunity for students to share the writing process and create a collaborative piece. Each individual writes a piece. Such a system reflects the constraints of a university, as collaboration could well be labelled plagiarism. The peer response form includes three broad, open-ended questions that could provide useful feedback for writers. However, the form also asks readers to place a tentative grade on the work. This undoes all of the broad, non-judgemental feedback that the reader has given up to this point. It asks the reader to judge the writing as if they were the teacher. Writers who read these forms will immediately glance down at the grade before they even read the comments. This is not conducive to collaborative learning, as the students are no longer equals. They become the teacher and the student. This creates peer relationships of low-equality, one of the characteristics of a peer tutoring programme, as defined by Damon and Phelps. Combined with the fact that the writing tasks are not joint efforts, this places this programme in the peer tutoring category.

R.B. Anderson and G.H. Michaels

Anderson and Michaels' (1995) peer review system is similar to the Peer Response Project from Indiana in that it asks undergraduates to review each other's draft work and to then change the draft according to the feedback received. However, this system is not as useful as the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. There are no opportunities for any form of dialogue between the writer and the reviewer. Instead, a computer system randomly sends an undergraduate paper to two separate undergraduate students who act as anonymous reviewers. They then send the comments back to the writer and the process ends. Knowledge and opinions travel one-way, as the reviewer comments on the writing, but the writer has no opportunity to talk with the reviewer(s). Damon and Phelps could argue that this type of one-way interaction is typical of a peer tutoring approach. This approach is low on equality because the reviewer has academic authority over the writer's work. It also fosters task-independence, a further characteristic of the peer

tutoring approach, because it asks *each individual* writer to produce a piece of work that is then scrutinised by another individual. There is no room for any sharing of the writing task.

There are other problems with this approach. First, the anonymity of the reviewer does not allow for any sort of peer interactions to occur. Peer interactions are an integral part of any peer writing programme, so it is debatable whether this system of peer review actually constitutes a peer writing programme. As part of the peer interaction process, students must come to know their peers as fellow students. In this case, however, the writer knows nothing about the reviewer. The writer has no notion of who the audience actually is. Anonymity also hinders the reciprocal nature of peer review. With the other programmes there is the *possibility*, even if it is not made explicit, that students will take turns at reviewing each other's work. Here, the writer cannot make contact with the reviewer. Johnson and Johnson would argue that this lack of face-to-face interaction and the absence of any attempt to foster inter-personal skills hinder the development of positive interdependence.

While the Pennsylvanian project allowed for students to make several revisions of their draft, this system only allows for only one revision of a final draft. The entire revision process occurs in the responding stage. This is problematic because, as McCarthy and McCahon (1995) note, it is typical of the narrow focus many peer writing programmes have. In one respect, this system seems preferable to the Pennsylvanian one: it allows the reviewer to make a huge variety of comments rather than simply answering three questions and grading the paper. Although this gives the reviewer greater license, it may create problems if reviewers are unsure how to critique writing.

R. Vivian

Unlike the other writing programmes that have been reviewed, Vivian's (1998) programme is actually a university course designed to train undergraduates as peer writing consultants. It seems that, once trained, they provide tutoring for fellow undergraduates. The web site devoted to this course outlines the course structure rather than the actual peer writing programme, so it is more difficult to evaluate than the other programmes explored in this paper.

The course involves exploring theories about peer consulting and completing a 20 hour practicum where students practise their consulting skills one-to-one or in groups (Vivian, 1998, p. 4). An unusual aspect of the practicum is the use of writing consultant mentors, who provide dialogue and constant feedback about students' consulting and act as resource persons. The mentors observe students' consulting but do not grade students. Although the details of this mentoring system are not available, I think that the emphasis on verbal feedback and the de-emphasis on grading is consistent with co-operative learning as Johnson and Johnson define it. Negative interdependence (i.e. competition) is de-emphasised and interpersonal skills and face-to-face interaction are utilised, helping to foster positive interdependence.

However, Damon and Phelps could argue that this programme fits within the peer tutoring model, as it relies on a knowledgeable other (a mentor) instructing students on the correct peer writing practices. The web site talks of the need for trainees to become writing experts so that they can go into classrooms and teach their fellow undergraduates (Vivian, 1998, p. 5). Furthermore, it is perpetuating this dominant model because it is using this knowledgeable other to

train a fellow student who, in turn, will become a writing consultant acting as the expert for a new group of undergraduates. I see this as problematic, not because the peer tutoring model is wrong, but because it seems to be the dominant model of peer writing within institutions.

CONCLUSION

Given the dominance of the peer tutoring model of group writing, it seems that we need more peer writing programmes that follow the co-operative learning and peer collaboration models. This is especially pertinent when we consider the benefits of co-operative learning environments, outlined by Johnson and Johnson, and more specifically, the benefits of peer writing programmes based on co-operative learning theory, as outlined by Damon and Phelps' model. In order to begin implementing more co-operative and collaborative peer writing programmes, we need to address a range of issues:

- Language teachers need to consider whether their peer writing programme falls within a peer tutoring framework, and if it does so, they need to examine whether they wish to develop a more collaborative approach.
- Teachers who do decide on a collaborative approach need to make consistent use of the peer group as a responsive context for writing. To begin with, the teacher will formally run this group, though as interpersonal skills develop the peer groups can become more informal.
- Teachers need to set more shared writing tasks so that the peer group has a common goal that they can work towards. This may be problematic in a secondary school or university because shared tasks may be viewed by some academics, and external examiners, as plagiarism.
- Given that most peer writing programmes confine themselves to the responding phase of writing, it seems educationalists need to expand peer writing programmes to cover all stages of the writing process, from gathering initial ideas to publishing. Within a classroom context this process could be very time-consuming. Therefore, teachers will need to negotiate a manageable routine whereby groups can work together for extended periods of time. Of the five peer writing programmes reviewed here, only Adler's programme and the Peer Response Project allowed peer interaction outside the responding phase.
- Educationalists need to consider designing peer writing programmes for small groups, rather than simply catering for pairs, as most seem to do. For co-operative and collaborative writing programmes, it is necessary to have a small group of five or six with which to share writing tasks and receive feedback. Within these groups, it is important that every member who receives feedback from the group members also has the opportunity to respond to the others' work. The response process must be reciprocal. Without this reciprocity the sense of equality within the group may diminish, as some writers gain authority as judges while others become the judged. This type of relationship is typical within the dominant peer tutoring model, as one person becomes the knowledgeable other.
- Although computer-run writing programmes are becoming popular, we need to question their ability to provide co-operative or collaborative approaches to writing. Johnson and Johnson claim that positive interdependence requires face-to-face verbal interaction and the constant use

of personal interaction skills. Computer-based programmes cannot provide these, as chat rooms and email cannot mimic verbal dialogue.

- Teachers need to consider how a co-operative approach to peer writing can provide a context in which to focus on the process of writing. Asking peers to share a writing task and discuss every step of that task, is an ideal way of making the writing process explicit to them.

Given the educational benefits of a co-operative approach, our challenge now, as teachers, is to find practical ways to develop co-operative peer writing programmes.

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