

CONSIDERING “DISPARATE” GENEALOGIES ANALOGOUSLY: A SURVEY  
INTO THE HISTORIES OF PEER RESPONSE GROUPS AND THEIR IMPACT ON  
CURRENT PEER RESPONSE PRACTICES

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## **Abstract**

### **CONSIDERING “DISPARATE” GENEALOGIES ANALOGOUSLY: A SURVEY INTO THE HISTORIES OF PEER RESPONSE GROUPS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CURRENT PEER RESPONSE PRACTICES**

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Peer response is a widely accepted pedagogical approach to teaching writing that goes unchallenged by contemporary compositionists. As a common pedagogical approach to teaching writing, there is a vast amount of scholarship written on the subject; nonetheless, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding unsuccessful narratives on peer response. For this reason, this project considers two seemingly disparate genealogies of peer response and reads them analogously. By reading two histories analogously that are typically positioned in opposition with one another, this project explores a broader definition of peer response and its purpose. The project’s analysis of peer response in these newly defined terms is revealing of the impact framing has on the implementation of peer response in classrooms. This project intends to re-visit this pedagogy as other scholars have, and examine these two histories critically in order to explore the “consequences” of the telling and re-telling of those histories.

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## Introduction

Peer response. A pedagogy often employed in composition classrooms, but also a pedagogy that is widely used across disciplines. In recent years, this collaborative approach, as it is most commonly used in composition classrooms (the environment in which we will be examining this pedagogy), has become a pedagogy worth revisiting. While it is true that this approach to the teaching of writing has been successful, in my experience as both an instructor and a writing tutor, I have found peer response to be a pedagogy mired in disappointments.

As an inexperienced instructor of writing, I clung to foundational pedagogies in order to adequately prepare my students for upcoming culminating projects. Peer response had been a pedagogy in which I participated as a student throughout my academic career; therefore, using this approach felt natural in my classroom. What I didn't expect were the ubiquitous groans from my students when I even mentioned the upcoming peer response exercises. And like any new teacher, I sought to convince my students otherwise: I would introduce them to peer response and they would love it, or at least appreciate it.

Despite the negative feedback toward peer response I received from my students early in the course, on the first day of peer response, I prepared a presentation on the subject before implementing peer response into the classroom. With my presentation, relevant scholarship on the subject, and an incessantly bright attitude toward this collaborative approach to writing, I started a conversation about peer response. To be honest, however, I was not prepared for my students' responses. Many expressed

resentment toward an exercise that took time away from their own work; others showed concern for the legitimacy of their partners' comments, and nearly all demonstrated sincere dislike for an exercise that forced them to rely on their partners' participation for a grade. One fifty-minute class early in the semester went from a discussion about peer response to a pseudo-peer response "support group." That day, student after student disclosed one horror story after another. When I asked for the verdict on whether or not we should do peer response, the class came to the consensus that we should not.

My previous assumptions about how my students would react to peer response had been thoroughly upended. Where I thought I'd find appreciation, or at least toleration, I found complete rejection of the practice. However, much to my students' dismay, I was undaunted; in total, we had three peer response days in the course. All of which were total chaos.

### **Teaching and Peer Response**

I took great pains to develop peer response exercises that were entirely different from one another. The first one followed a traditional peer response model: All students would initially submit a three-page draft of their paper to our online Moodle site and bring a copy of their draft for each of their partners to review in our in class. Each student had two partners, and each would have time in-class to read over their partners' drafts and give oral feedback. Students were encouraged to follow a worksheet I had distributed at the beginning of the exercise. The worksheet, which was initially developed by an experienced faculty member, was tweaked to serve as a guide for students to follow while they commented on their partners' papers. The groups had the entire class to discuss their

writing and were instructed to turn in the worksheets next class; this gave students an entire weekend with their worksheets, as we always conducted peer response exercises on Fridays.

In the first peer response experiment, most of my students came with full three-page drafts. While some, of course, did not bring full drafts all students were required to join their group members to talk about their papers.

As I walked around the classroom, I noticed the groups varied in their commenting styles. Some groups chose to only provide written feedback on their worksheets and did not talk to their partners at all. Those students quickly marked every real and imagined comma splice they could find and clung to their worksheets. Other groups talked briefly about their papers, but their concerns were more focused on their plans for the weekend. I mistakenly allowed students to leave the class when they had finished reading and responding to their partners' papers, which motivated groups to respond as quickly as possible. As a result, few groups took the entire class time reserved for the exercise and even fewer groups used their worksheets as I had intended. The worksheets were meant to inspire critical thinking and encourage authentic, deep responses. However, many students engaged with the open questions on the worksheet as if they were yes or no questions. Nonetheless, I did not think the exercise was a complete failure until I read the worksheets.

The questions were not yes or no questions; rather they were open-ended questions that were meant to spark critical thinking. Flipping through them though, I discovered "no" or "yes" answers to questions that asked about the effectiveness of the organization

of the paper. If I were a peer, I wouldn't have thought that someone saying "no" would lead to me any productive revisions.

I decided right then after reading endless worksheets filled with "yes" and "no" to prepare my students better next time. Before the next peer response experiment, I gave them examples of productive feedback and talking points for peer response. When I gave feedback on the final draft of their first paper, I tried to model what I wanted their feedback to look like. When it came time for the second peer response group exercise, we decided to do the entire exercise online with a revised worksheet as a reference. The result was better, as students felt more comfortable giving feedback online in the margins of their partners' papers. But we ran into similar issues with the quality of feedback students were giving their peers. It was productive in some respects, as it addressed surface writing concerns and gave students a sense of what sentences were harder to understand than others. Nonetheless, students were clearly ripping through their partners' essays quickly and carelessly.

Student's comments were focused on surface-level writing concerns, and few comments addressed larger, more global writing concerns, such as organization or purpose. Looking over the online comments, I noticed students speaking in incomplete sentences and abbreviated terms, and instead of crowded margins filled with comments, I found comments like "nice" or "awkward." These can be productive if the comment is explained, but they rarely were.

For the third and final attempt at peer response, I tried find a middle ground between the two earlier experiments, so I decided on a hybrid in class and online peer

response model. Students came to class on a Friday with three-page drafts like the previous rounds. Students talked about their drafts together in class and wrote peer response letters online over the weekend. They were given three days to write the letters, and there were few supplemental materials to guide them. I posted examples of peer response letters online the week of the exercise and gave them the green light to write their own after class on Friday. I was tired—tired of seeing feedback that was not helpful or that could only be described as basic copyediting. I thought online letters would give students the freedom to feel creative in a way. “Creative” assignments seemed to have cultural capital in the classroom, and students seemed to like them. I ran with the assumption that students would respond well to this model, but, like before, my assumptions were upended.

Despite a one-page minimum, most letters were less than half a page. Upon reading them, I found students did talk through their ideas more, perhaps because they had the room to do this and the freedom to write about the concerns they found most pressing in the draft. Instead of saying “no” or “yes,” students were forced to explain why they had commented as they had done, but the letters were still short and followed a similar pattern: students would explain why they commented but would rarely make suggestions or ask questions to help the writer revise. And once again, most critiques wholly ignored global writing concerns and focused entirely on the surface-level writing.

After the semester ended, I wanted to blame myself and my students rather than the pedagogy. I blamed myself for the things I could have done to implement peer response more effectively, and I blamed my students for their lack of interest in the practice. I

didn't question the pedagogy. The worksheets and letters I received were different than what I had expected to receive. Rather than question the practice of peer response, I labeled my experience in the classroom as a failure due to my inability to facilitate meaningful, constructive peer responses. Why did I think this? During this first semester as a teacher, I was also a writing tutor. I experienced successful peer response on a daily basis in the writing center environment. Perhaps an answer to my questions lay in analogous writing center practices, not peer response classroom theory.

### **Tutoring and Peer Response**

As a writing tutor, I met with a single student--sometimes multiple students--for thirty minutes to an hour. Depending on their needs or concerns I would read their paper and then we would talk about their writing. Not every tutoring session addressed all of the student's concerns, but overall, students would leave with an idea on how to move forward. The first thing I found was that tutees would come into the writing center with a concern in mind or a question. In a tutoring session, the tutor is put in a position try to answer those questions or address those concerns by giving advice or feedback. While a tutor's feedback is not always taken, their feedback drives the session forward by starting a dialogue about the writing. The second thing I found was that tutees came into the writing center because they saw tutors within the center as having the "correct" answers and solutions to their questions or concerns.

This is not to say that students had a reduced part in the tutoring interaction; rather feedback from the tutor was highly regarded and thought of as "expert knowledge." For example, if I were to note that the introduction paragraph needed to more clearly state the

purpose of the essay, a tutee would likely write that down and ask me how to proceed in doing so. This is important because I cannot imagine participants in any peer response exercise felt the weight of their feedback as I did in a tutoring session. Students in my course had just as many assumptions about peer response as I did and unfortunately, their assumptions about the credibility of their peers' feedback affected how each of them participated in their groups. In the writing center, tutors and tutees typically were more secure in the credibility of one another's feedback, which positively impacted the interaction between them.

When I think about the differences between my classroom environment and the writing studio, there is an ease in conversation during tutoring sessions in the writing studio that my peer response groups did not have. Students come to us, typically by choice, to sit down and talk about their writing. Contrary to the way I felt after my experiences with collaborative writing in my classroom, every session in the writing center firmly cemented my belief in collaborative pedagogy. Peer response works in the writing studio, but why didn't it work in my classroom?

Working vs. not-working, success pitted in opposition against failure, the way I thought about peer response was binary thinking at its finest. I could not imagine that there could be successes in my failures, nor could I acknowledge what did "work well" in my experiments. I am less concerned with keeping the binary of "success" and "failure" intact because in both of my experiences with collaborative writing inside the classroom and the writing studio have taught me to blur the lines between the two concepts. Instead I want to invite the messy type of thinking that enables us as scholars to think about

working and not-working or success and failure in less binary ways. I want to encourage scholars in the field of composition studies to do the type of reflective thinking I have done on my own experience so we may begin to see that peer response seen only in terms of success does fail to recognize the shortcomings and flaws of the pedagogy. Therefore, I have decided to revisit the history of peer response keeping in mind the binary terms in which we have constructed successful peer response and failed peer response.

Concerning myself with narratives of success and failure serves the purpose of revealing two sides of a typically one-sided story. For example, when I read scholarship on collaborative pedagogy, specifically scholarship on peer response in composition classrooms, I am not typically bombarded with the narratives of students or instructors who have had difficulties with the approach. More often than not, I encounter endless narratives on the innumerable benefits of the approach or theories that further expound the efficacy of the approach. What's missing from this body of literature are the students' stories of how peer response didn't work for them or how it was difficult, uncomfortable, or unnecessary. As well, I rarely come across the lamentations of composition instructors on unruly peer response days where students came either unprepared or unmotivated.

There is a hole in the scholarship on peer response; in other words, one that could hold a counter-narrative to the success narrative on peer response I've encountered. In my revisiting of this pedagogy I do not seek to fill the hole with the voices of students from empirical studies I have conducted. That, in my mind, is not the first step. I alone cannot give failure narratives the importance they need to become relevant in this body of scholarship so focused on success narratives. The history of peer response has an intimate

relationship with success, and without first investigating the effect of this relationship on us composition scholars, I cannot convince a vast group of academics to recognize the voices of silenced students.

Let me explain. As a student, I have been exposed to peer response in numerous ways. I have participated in these groups as a student, instructor, and as a tutor. In each of these experiences, the “talk” about peer response is the same. Chiefly, peer response is a collaborative pedagogy, which not only develops participants’ writing ability, but also serves to develop awareness towards one’s writing choices as well as others’ writing choices. As a student, I was encouraged to participate for these reasons. I was promised that peer response would be an exercise where I could gain insight from others by talking about writing and the choices we made. I was never made aware, by either professors or scholars, of a downside to peer response. And as I continued through my academic career, I wasn’t led to believe there was a possibility of there being drawbacks to implementing peer response.

Each scholar I read seemed to want to prove the efficacy of this pedagogy. Movements such as collaborative learning, process writing, or writing as a social act further convinced me that there seemed to be an entire history of success without failures. While I wasn’t actively searching for failures in my studies, as I was deeply convinced and connected to the success narratives on peer response, I didn’t stumble across any failure narratives and I didn’t experience many failures. Even as a creative writing student, my fellow creative writing majors valued collaborative practice. “Peer response works:” this is the main argument of the dominant narrative.

I operated under the same presumption that peer response always works; therefore, I feel as if, even now, I am firmly inside the dominant way of thinking about peer response. I cannot exist outside of this. I've been told the history and in turn, I have spent time perpetuating it and maintaining it. Peer response "works" became my argument, not just the argument of the dominant narrative on the subject.

As a result, I have a certain ideal about peer response and certain expectations. For example, my students should have received the peer response exercises in my composition course more positively. The opportunity to talk about their writing with their peers, rather than myself, was meant to give students a lower-stakes space to develop their ideas and to gain insight on how their writing might grow. I expected "natural" conversations to occur about writing choices and for all students to be comfortable talking to their peers. Firmly wrapped up in a dominant narrative, I willfully ignored the possibility of failure, which led me to question exactly what are the effects of others and my valuation of this particular history of peer response?

In a way, I am taking up a similar conversation as Kory Lawson Ching in her recent article "Peer Response in the Composition Classroom: An Alternative Genealogy," which investigated Anne Ruggles Gere's 1987 publication *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Gere did what others had not done for peer response; *Writing Groups* traced the history of writing groups in America. This text is still the most comprehensive study of the practice of working in groups to develop writing skills; in fact, when researching peer response, it is difficult to come by a bibliography that does not include Gere or an article that does not engage with Gere. Ching's article recognizes the weight

of Gere's text even in contemporary composition scholarship by acknowledging it as the dominant genealogy on peer response. After reading *Writing Groups*, I found echoes of the history Gere was telling in the composition scholarship I read, the classes I took, and in the university positions I held. For these reasons, I identify the history Gere tells as the dominant narrative on peer response and I follow Ching's thread of consciousness by questioning the influence the dominant narrative has on compositionists; however, unlike Ching I don't endeavor to "fix" the peer response groups as we know them. Ching argues for an alternative peer response group, one that would include rather than exclude the instructor of writing. While Ching's suggestions are inspired, putting an instructor in the peer response group doesn't always address what I consider to be the underlying issue of the pedagogy, namely, *how educators have ignored the possibility that peer response groups are problematic sites in our classrooms.*

In the following pages of this project, I will strive to adequately answer Ching's question regarding the influence of Gere's history on current compositionists' practices, and in turn, critically analyze this particular pedagogy in a time where its success has been unchallenged and remains largely so to this day.

My purpose is not to discount peer response, but instead to encourage others studying the teaching of writing like myself to revisit the fundamentals of our discipline. Composition is filled with pedagogies like peer response, which also need to be questioned and revised, as we are in the business of educating diverse groups of people. I am unable to choose who walks into my classroom and who will participate in peer response exercises I implement. As such, my using a pedagogy without considering how

it will affect my students unsettles me.

Surely there are consequences, as Ching words it, for the histories we tell. I for one can see how the dominant narrative on peer response has framed my ideas about this pedagogy. For the first time, I am also noticing how important failure is to constructing a narrative, which is what the dominant narrative lacks. My students did not want to participate in peer response, my students did not enjoy peer response, my students did not value peer response.

In the first section of this project we begin by consulting the history of peer response, both Gere's and Ching's tellings. In order to examine the two histories side by side, when they are typically read as opposing one another, it is best that we read their seemingly contrasting narratives analogously. To read analogously would mean to read the two narratives side by side, for if we entertain multiple narratives then we will have a better understanding of the pedagogy as a whole.

After which, in the second section of this project, we consider the theoretical underpinnings of Gere and Ching's historical accounts on peer response to reveal the distinct ideologies that exist within these historical tellings. We tend to think of comprehensive accounts such as Gere and Ching's texts as written from objective perspectives; however, in this section we investigate both Gere and Ching's rhetorics to show their narratives and their deep connections with theoretical communities such as expressionism and current traditional rhetoric.

In the third section, we consult texts that can best be described as "teacher aids" or texts that are typically written with the teacher of writing in mind. These texts seek to

give advice to the teacher of writing and illustrate how peer response is practiced today. In this section, We explore the deep roots current peer response practices have with assumptions about writing we found earlier in Gere's timeline. In doing so, we will highlight how influential the framing surrounding peer response is on our current peer response practices.

The fourth section shifts the focus onto student experience in order to articulate further the real, felt consequences that stem from our current peer response practices. We investigate the effects that our assumptions have on students by consulting articles that include student voices. We do so in an effort to read for what is not there; that is, there are very few articles that showcase student perspectives; therefore, we must read for the silences that our current practices ignore.

Finally, in our fifth section we will reflect on alternative models for peer response and attempt to grapple with "success" and what constitutes successful peer response. While it is impossible to exist outside the dominant narrative of peer response, we will try to reimagine success in relation to peer response in new terms.

## Section 1

In studying a pedagogical approach such as peer response, one must first unravel the theoretical underpinnings of this particular pedagogy. We know peer response to be a collaborative writing approach to teaching writing, which in turn classifies this approach as one that is inextricably dependent on social interaction between individuals.

Collaborative learning is feedback: the other facets of collaborative learning (i.e. number of participants, activity, environment, etc.) are layers built upon the foundation of people giving and receiving feedback (Gebhardt 69). This pedagogy is selectively based on principles from theorists such as Lev Vygostky and John Dewey.

Furthermore, in a collaborative learning approach, feedback is also the basis of peer response. To say that peer response is a collaborative learning approach tends to situate the pedagogy within the expressionist moment of the sixties and seventies. Although this is how peer response is typically framed, this pedagogy has actually been around since colonial America and predates the expressionist movement. Thus, by associating peer response with collaborative learning practices I do not intend to locate peer response in the expressionist movement. Instead I do so to draw attention to the connection between the pedagogy and feedback (Gere 9).

To date, Anne Ruggles Gere's text *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* is the most popular book on the history of *writing groups*, which is a broader term Gere uses in her text to encapsulate all collaborative learning exercises that involve groups of people giving and receiving feedback on writing. Peer response, as we will continue to call it, is one of the many collaborative learning pedagogies included in this

broader term of writing groups. The significance of Gere's text to this project and the body of scholarship on peer response goes unquestioned, as Gere's tracing of writing groups is the only "comprehensive" account on the subject. Without first consulting Gere there is no way to map peer response, which is precisely the reason why Gere's telling of the history of writing groups is significant and also why her narrative feels familiar.

Published in 1987, Gere's text came onto a changing scene in composition scholarship, as expressionism and cognitivism became less prevalent and as social epistemic theory and critical composition began to evolve. The rhetoric and theoretical climate of her text is distinctly familiar even from my position in 2017. Which is to say, Gere's text is firmly situated in the dominant way of thinking about writing groups; it located writing groups in the expressionist ideology that has influenced how we imagine peer response today, which we will explore further in later sections. For the remainder of this section, however, in order to investigate the ideological underpinnings of Gere's telling of the history of writing groups, first we must revisit her genealogy.

After which, we must revisit Ching's article "Peer Response in the Composition Classroom: An Alternative Genealogy," for her important article diverges from Gere's timeline and thus provides the alternative timeline we will consider. Gere's narrative may not consult in depth the sources that Ching's timeline focuses on, but we will continue her work by analyzing some of the peripheral sources that advocated for peer response to be used as either a vehicle for the current-traditional rhetoric model or as a method for alleviating the workload of the teacher from Gere's bibliography that are in conversation with Ching's alternative counter-timeline. These additional sources were sources that

were not analyzed by Ching in her article. Thus, I will be adding to her alternative timeline. Through development of an extended alternative timeline that branches off of Ching's original alternative timeline, we will gain a fuller sense of the history of peer response. I argue for a "fuller sense" of the history because we, as a field, have long considered a singular narrative on peer response. It is because of this narrative that we implement peer response the way we do, and I intended to shed light on the problematic nature of our current practices.

### **Gere's Genealogy**

Gere first explains how writing groups and the practice of peer response within them predates the expressionist movement and establishes writing groups as a practice that came into fruition in the early years of colonial America. She certainly doesn't object to the notion that there have, perhaps, always been writing groups inside and outside of academic environments; indeed, she marks the earliest development of writing groups in academia with the formation of literary societies in the late eighteenth century (10).

Literary societies were typically organized student groups formed in academic environments. Primarily the purpose of meeting in these organized groups was to fulfill needs created by the absence of other collegiate communities on campus, which is to say that students would meet to socialize as well as to aid each other in their academic pursuits.

According to Gere, at the same time outside of the university, groups were also formed and maintained in order to foster the personal improvement of all in the group. Gere aptly titles them "mutual improvement groups" (32). Built on the premise that many

knowledgeable persons coming together would be more beneficial to society than a few intellectuals writing only for themselves. Improvement groups wrote reports on societal concerns and shared them with other members (34). At this point in Gere's timeline, literary societies and personal improvement groups are represented as if they were on display in a museum, as evidenced by Gere's treatment of them in her text. For example, when both groups undergo significant changes to how they operate Gere's tone becomes noticeably despondent. The change in Gere's tone demonstrates how she favored the literary societies and improvement groups of the past over the altered literary societies and improvement groups. What is significant about her favoring the past is that her favor introduces into her narrative a subtextual argument for the older models of collaborative writing. Models that are specifically associated with autonomy and represented as having highly self-motivated group members.

Both literary societies and improvement groups continued to emerge throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century; however, literary societies in particular, experienced significant changes over time. While there is no concrete evidence for the cause of the changes, Gere and others attribute the demand for literary societies to either disband or shape-shift to the rise of different campus institutions, such as fraternities (13). Writing clubs and debate societies were some of the final forms in the evolution of former literary societies, although with the decline of literary societies on campus, an increased number of academic institutions began to include literary societies' collaborative writing practices in their curricula (15).

Outside of the academic sphere, mutual improvement groups continued from the

eighteenth century on to the mid-nineteenth century, but were deeply affected by the events of the American Civil War. The Civil War disrupted an educational movement that housed most mutual improvement groups of that time called the Lyceum movement, which sought to develop adult education in the Northwest and Midwest. However, like other mutual improvement groups outside of the Lyceum Movement, the events of the war derailed groups' obligations and purposes, and as a result many groups disbanded, while others subsisted going largely unnoticed.

In the face of adversity of the mid-nineteenth century, some mutual improvement groups changed their shape entirely and from them public lecture series were established (37). These series' circuits attracted thousands from a variety of social classes. Who specifically had access to these circuits is unclear and unstated in Gere's account of the moment in history, although it could be assumed that public lecture series' regard for "self-education" would have been an early step toward making education more accessible to those typically excluded from the academy at the time.

For example, there was a rise in women's clubs toward the end of the nineteenth century outside of the academy. Women were permitted to attend a lecture series, among other improvement group meetings when accompanied by a male member of their family, but overall were "actively discouraged" from establishing their own groups; as well they were "barred from higher education" (39). At this point in her timeline, Gere proved the pervasiveness of collaborative writing practices inside and outside of the academy; what we should note though is her representation of how collaborative writing practices were received initially by the academy. Despite universities choosing to adopt collaborative

practices into curriculum, the “experimental” practices were not highly regarded. At this point in Gere’s timeline, we can begin to notice how differently Gere is representing collaborative practices. Compared to the earlier more positively associated points in her timeline, the adoption of collaborative peer response into the university appears to be associated with decline.

Universities at the turn of the nineteenth century began to appropriate the literary society and the mutual improvement group’s collaborative practices for their own uses. It is during this time that the collaborative practices of literary societies were “formalized” and put into practice in creative writing courses, subsequently being reframed as the “workshop approach” to writing development (15). Despite collaborative writing practices being integrated into college classes, there was a longstanding suspicion of the practice of giving and receiving feedback on expository writing, as opposed to “creative” writing. That is to say, compositionists at the time felt there was a divide between expository and “creative” writing (15). Gere’s earlier despondent tone becomes more deep-rooted and grows more critical as she covers the periods where writing groups are not regarded with the same esteem that they once were. The way she represents the formalization of collaborative writing practices is then itself an argument. If we think about the earliest points in Gere’s timeline, in which literary societies were highly regarded by Gere for their autonomy and successfulness, the academy’s suspicion of collaborative learning as a point in Gere’s timeline appears in stark contrast. Collaborative writing of the past was associated with activism, community building, and support, whereas more formalized collaborative approaches in the academy are regarded

as suspicious, experimental, or radical. Therefore, we should take notice of her shifting tone if we are to understand how Gere privileges the collaborative writing models from the earliest points in her timeline over the more contemporary models.

Gere continues her timeline by further discussing the broader distrust for the writing workshop within composition courses. Both Yale (1895) and MIT (1901) established composition courses with curriculum that required students to “critique” their classmates’ compositions (17). Critique at the time addressed little more than localized writing concerns, which is to say students were mainly commenting on their peer’s usage of grammar and style; however, in MIT’s description of how the “experimental” composition course of 1901 performed, transcripts of student comments showed that they also engaged with larger writing concerns or global concerns (17). For example, students asked thought provoking questions about the content of the paper, theoretically prompting the peer receiving their feedback to evaluate global writing concerns such as organization (17).

Even with the emergence of writing groups in secondary schools in 1880 and their continued popularity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. In addition to the rise in formal studies from 1919 on the subject, writing groups were still considered marginal from the 1960s to the early 1980s (18). This in part can be attributed to writing groups being associated with what Gere called “experimental” pedagogy. Regardless of the numerous articles written at this point in the history of writing groups, public perception of writing groups did not, according to Gere, undergo a change until a series of influential events, which included: the 1966 Dartmouth Conference, the NWP

(National Writing Project), and the rising number of published scholarly works on the subject of writing groups (28-48).

Gere traced writing groups to illustrate their influence over time, yet ended her timeline on a bleak note when she categorized writing groups as “marginal” (52). What we should notice is that her bleak end contrasts starkly from her bright beginning. It is evident that Gere favors one piece of the history she is telling: the past. Her telling of the past seems more like exhibition, rather than an objective re-telling of the history of writing groups. Regardless of where Gere ends, what we must notice is bias she has for the earlier days of writing groups. By privileging one model over another, Gere is constructing what “success” and “failure” means in relation to writing groups. Her readers get a clear sense that the earlier points in Gere’s timeline make up the “golden age” of collaborative writing groups. Building off Ching’s theory that Gere idealized a period in the history of peer response and using her term, “golden age,” to categorize this idealized period, I mean to expand on Ching’s argument and explore more deeply the ways that Gere harkened for a return to the past, which she represented as inherently better. In order to understand the myriad ways Gere’s narrative has influenced our current practices of peer response, it is important to realize that Gere is not simply compiling a history for her audience. She constructed a narrative on writing groups to tell her audience about them, but also to teach others how to implement the pedagogy in their classroom. Thus, her construction of what is “successful” and what we should, as teachers, be emulating is important to our conversation. Our purpose is to look at how the history of peer response has influenced our current peer response practices. As we will

find, Gere's narrative and her definitions of "success" and "failure" have impacted generations of compositionists. Without a "fuller sense" of the history of peer response, Gere is the singular authority on this pedagogy and I mean to challenge that.

Ching's alternative genealogy surprisingly begins in a similar period as Gere's did, which evidences the possibility that we can read *Writing Groups* alone, but when we read this text alongside Ching's article we are invited to see a range of representations of peer response.

### **Ching's Genealogy**

Keeping in mind the form Ching's genealogy appears in, Ching's scope comparatively was narrow as she chose to focus solely on writing groups in the later half of the nineteenth century. Her article "Peer Response in the Classroom: An Alternative Genealogy" proposes an alternative history of writing groups. A history not entirely ignored by Gere in her text; nonetheless, the moments Ching chose to feature in her alternative genealogy are moments that can be described as cursory moments in Gere's genealogy. Ching felt that it was important to expound on the moments Gere did not give attention to as well as analyze how Gere included and excluded certain points from her timeline. Thus, Ching's narrative tells a different history than Gere's and gives us access to alternative representations of peer response, but this does not mean Ching's narrative is not biased or inherently "better." Like Gere, Ching made deliberate choices to construct a narrative that suited her purpose, but by considering Ching and Gere alongside each other we are able to see how peer response is influenced by the narrative that surrounds it.

For instance, the first point in Ching's alternative history is an account by a

fatigued composition teacher in the *National Journal of Education* column, who sought advice from their fellow educators on how they might more successfully encourage students in their classroom. The teacher lamented in the advice column about students who lacked investment in their writing assignments. A.A. Lord, a columnist, suggested an approach that is markedly similar to current-traditional rhetoric practices, which favored “correctness” and “style” (Ching 309). Lord’s exercise would have a teacher read a composition aloud and have the students rewrite the composition. Memory and attention to detail would be key in the initial steps of the exercise, after which students would be called upon by the teacher to read their version of the composition aloud to the class. While a student was reading their version aloud, other students would be called on to amend their classmate’s version, if there was in fact a need of correction (309). Ching aptly points out the skills being emphasized and developed in the exercise, namely, “recitation and correction;” in doing so she constructs possible secondary purposes for implementing writing group exercises (309).

Gere’s engagement with the 1880 advice column was quick. She writes in the Bibliography section of her text, under the heading of “Attitudes” and “1880:” “Lord: In response to an inquiry from a teacher interested in increasing student motivation toward writing, the author suggests that students read their writing aloud and *criticize* one another” (126). As the first point in Gere’s bibliography, Lord serves to show a newly immersing attitude toward collaborative learning. But more importantly, Gere’s employment of “criticize” over “correction” distances Lord’s exercise from current-traditional rhetoric practices (Ching 309). By highlighting Lord’s usage of “correction”

and Gere's deliberate word choice of "criticize" Ching argued for a different reading of the primary document.

Reading Lord without ignoring the usage of "correction" does not discount what Gere noticed. Lord's suggestion for teachers to distribute authority among their students in order to develop writing ability is certainly a notable point in the history of writing groups; however, with that being said the history on writing groups is made richer by consulting Ching's alternative genealogy, for Ching's history provides the narratives Gere chose to exclude from her timeline.

After Ching's engagement with Lord's article, the other moments in the alternative history she tells mainly focus on peer response as a practical exercise a teacher of writing could employ when they needed to lessen their workload. J.G. Wright's article "The First Year in English in the High School" published in 1892 is markedly the first of many articles that would mention peer response as a delegating method. Wright states "let the pupils to some extent, correct one another's written work, especially after the teacher has criticized as many papers as practicable before the class" (qtd. in Ching 310) to encourage educators to think of peer response as a multifaceted tool, one that could aid them when they are overcome with papers.

Two years following Wright's article, a 1894 article written by William Maxwell revealed the relationship among peer response, current-traditional rhetoric, and workload (310). Maxwell, like Lord and Wright before him, employs the term "correction" throughout the article. Maxwell admits to correction being fundamental to developing writers' ability, but encourages teachers to "find a way for 'correction of error' to happen

without sentencing teachers to mind-numbing tedium” (qtd. in Ching 310). Maxwell’s solution to the tedium of giving endless feedback was peer response. Ching engages with Maxwell for this reason and argues that for quite some time peer response has often been used to relieve workload. If we think back to Gere’s timeline, peer response was rarely put in conjunction with purposes and goals such as relieving workload and we get the sense from Gere that relieving workload is an unfavorable purpose. However, it is evident that peer response can be used for a multitude of purposes. One purpose is not lesser than the other and it is important to read these two narratives analogously so that we may have a greater understanding of the entire history rather than just a piece of it.

Ching identifies Maxwell’s usage of inflammatory terms and phrases such as the earlier quoted “mind-numbing tedium” as correlating with the worsening conditions of educators in the academy. For example, Ching notes, “As the nineteenth century conditions of composition teachers grew worse” teachers had to modify their practices to meet the demands of an increased number of students. College administrators were put in the position where they had to meet the growing demand of larger student bodies, thus, less experienced teachers (typically graduate and higher level students who were studying to become teachers) were placed in teaching positions to meet that demand (312). With this in mind, peer response practices can be traced to nineteenth century classrooms, for many teachers of writing implemented the pedagogy as a way to reduce their workload, but at the same time increase the number of times students received feedback on their writing.

Due to Ching’s genealogy taking shape in an article rather than a book, Ching’s

telling of the history of peer response ends in 1894. In spite of her timeline ending at that point, I am able to continue tracing the interconnected relationship among peer response, current-traditional rhetoric, and workload by mining Gere's bibliography.

### **Ching's Genealogy Expanded**

Each entry in Gere's bibliography serves to mark an influential point in the history of writing groups. In Gere's chronological list the points are labeled to give the reader a short synopsis for each article, book, or column. We will begin at the point where Ching left off and do similar analytical work on the sources Ching did not engage with. I do so to reveal the continued presence of current-traditional models of rhetoric in the history of peer response, as well as exhibit the enduring use of peer response as a method to reduce workload.

Doris Benardete's advice to struggling writing teachers trying to manage their workload in *College English* is another example of peer response being placed in association with current-traditional rhetorical forms. In her discussion, Benardete proposed a practical solution to the "drudgery" of marking papers, namely, a form of peer response that would enlist students to mark papers and point out errors (383). The issues she suggested are overcrowded classrooms and the never-ending responsibility to grade student writing. Benardete writes, "It would take not one hour but years, perhaps, to tackle thoroughly the business of correcting all the common errors in a given set of freshman themes, unless the class is superior to any I have ever encountered" (383). She does so to articulate the impossibility of a teacher never encountering a body of students that need no assistance with common writing errors. Benardete also stresses the necessity

for a practical solution to this issue. Simplicity and practicality are the key factors of Benardete's approach to peer response, as her plan for teachers of writing sought to relieve teachers from their never-ending paper grading duties. What is not present in any of Benardete's conversation on peer response are the other valuable aspects of peer response. For example, in many of the sources that make up Gere's timeline, peer response is constituted as a valuable approach for teaching writing for its collaborative orientation or for the critical awareness students develop while working in peer response groups. In Gere's sources the pedagogical value of peer response is determined by how effective writing groups were in fostering students' writing and critical thinking ability. Whereas in Benardete's article, the primary concern is to reduce the amount of student papers that need grading. By reading these two narratives side by side we are able to imagine a history of peer response that can include both purposes for the collaborative approach. If we only read Gere or Ching alone we do not have the opportunity to understand the many possibilities for the pedagogy.

With Benardete's purpose in mind, the language of her article can be understood as yet another example of the ways in which the history of peer response has been connected with current-traditional models of rhetoric, which further evidences how peer response can be practiced and implemented for different purposes than the purposes we were initially introduced to in Gere's timeline. Typically in current-traditional models of rhetoric, teachers of writing would be primarily concerned with usage and style, in addition to other aspects of effective writing such as elegance or structure. That is to say, more traditional rhetoric forms take into consideration the finished product as opposed to

the process of writing. When Benardete employs terms like “correct” and “error,” she is preserving traditional ideology within her peer response exercise. For instance, her particular peer response exercise requires students to search for common errors such as issues of spelling, grammar, or suspect diction choices in order to fix those errors. Where we can spot the ideological difference between this source and many of the sources from Gere’s main timeline is in Benardete’s approach to error.

Ray C. Maize’s 1951 article, “The Partner Method of Review at the Air Command and Staff School” does not take place within a composition classroom setting, as other articles in this expanded timeline did; nonetheless, Maize’s article detailed another account where peer response was implemented as a way to reduce the workload of the instructor. Faced with extremely large class sizes, the Air Command and Staff School was placed in a difficult situation where they wanted to provide writing instruction to Air Force officers, but did not know how to meet the needs of approximately 480 students with varied backgrounds and writing ability (396).

The solution that was created was the “partner method” where students would work in pairs and could approach criticizing each other’s writing in one of three approved ways. First, pairs would meet in-person and edit together; the second method allowed pairs to work independently and edit their partner’s paper. The third method amalgamated the earlier two; that is, pairs would edit their partner’s paper alone, then come together (398). Much like Benardete’s practical plan for teachers of writing, the “partner method” was established for the sole reason of accommodating a vast number of students when a single teacher could not do so. Maize’s article is another point in the

history of peer response where peer response was used to alleviate workload. Looking at Gere's narrative in comparison, peer response was not represented as serving this purpose. Instead peer response was associated with activism, building community, and fixing writing errors, yet as Maize's article and other articles from this alternative timeline reveal there are multiple purposes for implementing peer response in a classroom. By reading Gere's narrative alongside Ching's we can conclude that peer response *can* be understood in different terms. We should notice how the way the talk about peer response influences how we implement it. Accordingly, if I ascribe to Gere's beliefs I would see the purpose of peer response differently than I would if I understood peer response in Ching's terms. We must then acknowledge the importance of how and in what terms a narrative is told if we are to re-examine peer response effectively.

Returning to Maize, he stressed the impracticability of other options, such as hiring additional help to aid the teacher in grading and commenting on papers. In turn, peer response in this article exists only as a means to an end, where the end is simply having all 480 students have the opportunity to have their paper read. Maize writes, "it cannot be expected to work perfectly from the start...other techniques should be employed to develop writing skills..." (399) in order to warn his audience away from using this pedagogical approach as the sole means of teaching writing. This is notable for our current conversation, as Maize along with others in this expanded timeline doesn't spend time raving about the pedagogical value of peer response. Rather, the importance and most practical usages of peer response exercises in this article is the number of students it can serve, which is why Maize's article is a notable moment in the history of peer

response. As Maize encourages peer response in the classroom, he also cautions the implementation of peer response by pointing out the “recognizable weaknesses” of the practice. By addressing the weaknesses of the pedagogy Maize sought to undermine the pedagogical value of peer response much like Benardete and Lord did prior (399).

In the majority of Gere’s historical accounts, writing groups and by association peer response was never presented in a wholly negative light. While drawbacks of the pedagogy may have been entertained, they were not the focus of Gere’s scholarship. Eric W. Johnson’s article, “Avoiding Martyrdom in Teaching Writing: Some Shortcuts,” is an article that notably classifies peer response as a “shortcut” to teaching writing (399). Johnson argued that the practice of teaching shortcuts, like the peer response method he proposed, is “not noble,” but “not immoral” either (399). As mentioned earlier, this article is one of the few articles to cast peer response into a pedagogical grey area between morality and immorality and portray it as a way to cut corners.

In the space of Johnson’s article, small-group work and the peer response that occurred within those groups “renders it unnecessary for the teacher to mark some sets of papers at all” (401), which is primarily why Johnson suggested that we “indulge in these shortcuts;” however he warned that we should only “indulge” in “moderation” (402). Peer response and group work by association when constructed as indulgent gives the reader a felt sense of shame as if peer response was a bad practice. If Johnson intended peer response to sound like a dirty trick, he certainly succeeded. His article is in this extended counter-timeline because of his specific phrasing. Very rarely do narratives that present peer response as shortcuts enter the broader conversation on peer response, and

what this article demonstrates are the ways peer response can be used for time-efficient strategies in the classroom.

Inversely, Theodore W. Hipple took a different perspective when he approached peer response in his article “The Grader’s Helpers—Colleagues, Peers, Scorecards,” when he argued for peer response as a time saving pedagogy. By different, I mean that Hipple argued for the pedagogical value of peer response and hailed the approach. The change in tone however, doesn’t change our purpose. Hipple made Gere’s bibliography and my extended counter-timeline due to his argument regarding peer response, namely, peer response among other methods can be used to both improve student writing and to aid the writing instructor dealing with papers. This is important to the overall purpose of this section because we are trying to trace alternative uses for peer response through articles on the subject. Gere gave us her timeline, but excluded every one of these articles I am exploring now and put them in an abbreviated timeline, one that most readers would have trouble finding as it is in the back of the book. When we trace alternative uses for peer response we are able to highlight, like Ching did before me, the relationship between peer response pedagogy with other theoretical circles such as current-traditional rhetoric or cognitivism. As well, when we include those alternative purposes in our own counter-timeline, we are able construct a much fuller narrative on peer response.

In several ways Hipple grounds peer response as a time saver pedagogy and although the ways in which he argued this thesis does feel reminiscent to models of current-traditional rhetoric, similar to other scholars mentioned in this extended timeline, Hipple’s article is also representative of the changing tides in composition theory.

Hipple's argument began by appealing to an overworked audience of educators who by definition could not possibly read all their students' work or address all writing "themes" (693). "Themes" like the term "correction" is in a similar lexical category associated with current-traditional rhetoric practices and theories," but Hipple doesn't evoke current-traditional rhetoric in any other way. More important to his argument is addressing the problem in grading and he did so by selling his audience on the value of the peer responder (692). Peer responders could, in Hipple's eyes, "write for a larger audience than that the teacher alone can provide...this larger audience is composed of friends and classmates whose opinions may loom as being far more significant than the teacher's" (692). Notice where Hipple and Johnson differ: one viewed peer responders as an indulgence and the other a more effective alternative, and what's significant is no matter their view on peer response they came to the same conclusion. This conclusion is not contingent upon disliking peer response, as some might argue, rather Johnson, Hipple, and many others saw peer response as serving a multiplicity of purposes. Hipple's conclusion that peer response is a solution to the overworked teacher situation underscores a necessary point in my own argument, that is, peer response in this alternative counter-genealogy is not entirely disparate from the peer response timeline in Gere's. Simply put, the connection among peer response with current-traditional rhetoric and workload does not cancel out the connection between peer response and other theories evoked by Gere. Further, by consulting the many connections between peer response and theory we become more aware of how theory, when applied to peer response, often guides the purpose of the peer response group.

For example, Gere's theoretical bias is toward expressionism and social epistemic theory and her leanings affect the way in which she constructs both her narrative and her ideal peer response group. I can imagine that any peer response group she implemented would likely try to meet some of the goals of expressionism and social epistemic theory. Much in the same way, Ching's leaning toward current-traditional rhetoric influences the way she constructs her narrative. What we should glean from the different ways they construct their narratives are how tied their narratives are to the theory behind them, and therefore how subject we are to the agendas those theories carry. In short, theory has an effect on how we implement peer response in our classroom.

Francine Hardaway argued for peer response as a method best used to unburden the teacher; however, Hardaway like Hipple distanced her conversation about peer response from rhetoric models concerned with correction and error. Hardaway, if not for her primary thesis, might be better placed in Gere's timeline, as she speaks in line with Peter Elbow and other supporters of "teacherless" classrooms (Elbow) and "student-centered techniques" (Hardaway 577). Hardaway's step-by-step instruction is less an articulation of how peer response can serve any instructor of writing and rather a guide for the new instructor who is inexperienced and needs an easy, effective approach to teaching writing (577-78). Regardless of her theoretical and ideological leanings, Hardaway can see the potential of peer response as a method for combatting workload and it is for this reason that she appears in my extended timeline. As well, Hardaway and Hipple serve to silence the counterargument which imagines Ching's initial timeline and my extended one as representing peer response in a wholly negative light.

Hardaway's tone and Leger Brosnaham's tone in his article "Getting Freshman Comp All Together" are similar and illustrate how scholars who did belong to similar circles of thought as Gere could imagine peer response as serving "alternative" purposes, such as alleviating workload. Hardaway writes, "For once he [student writer] isn't writing only for the teacher; he must engage the attention of his peers, who aren't being paid of their kindness" (578). Whereas Brosnaham notes, "This process focuses instruction on the real needs of individual students" (658). The contexts are similar as both scholars are talking about how peer response serves the student and their individual needs. As well, both value peer response and find that as a pedagogy, it has the unique ability to address students in ways that teachers, perhaps, cannot.

### **How to Read these Histories**

There is a reason Ching titled her article "Peer Response in the Composition Classroom: An Alternative Genealogy," namely, her telling of the history of peer response is an alternative telling: it is not Gere's telling. What we can glean from this is the dominance of Gere's account on the subject; for this reason I argue that we should read the two histories analogously, as there is no one comprehensive account on peer response.

Gere's history as the primary history from which numerous conversations stem, imagines writing groups as serving students and teachers alike by: "reducing alienation" (Gere 68), "providing community" (73), "developing thought and language" (76), and it empowers students to "create" knowledge collaboratively (69). Whereas Ching's alternative history illustrates additional purposes for the implementation of peer response that largely categorize peer response as both an exercise that can engender students to

develop their writing ability, but also presents peer response as being a practicable solution to problems in the classroom. At a glance, these histories seem to combat one another and resist our analogous reading, and I imagine the contention stems from our continued resistance to Ching's alternative genealogy. Ching's genealogy as we explored is intimately tied to more traditional models of rhetoric, rhetoric that encouraged product over process and error and correction over multiple revisions, which does not really fall in line with how contemporary compositionists are thinking today.

Unlike Ching, I propose we read these two histories not to change peer response as we know it today; rather we should use a messier, perhaps, contradictory history that showcases multiple uses for peer response as a starting point to question how we have constructed peer response.

The following passage is from a contemporary article on peer response: "Research suggests that peer response, when used appropriately is beneficial to learners in a variety of ways. Proponents cite its potential for cognitive, social, and linguistic benefits...that in first language (L1) writing classes, virtually all studies 'concluded that peer responding is superior to teacher response alone since it produces results at least as good as, if not better than, teacher response'" (qtd. in O'Donnell 415). Published in 2014, this account is demonstrative of current opinion on peer response. Notice the author does not have to explain what research supports peer response, as well, the usage of the phrase "virtually all" is used with confidence and states strongly that peer response is working and will continue to work. Largely, there is one way of thinking about success and peer response and this is it. We can mark echoes of Gere's history in this short, but revealing passage.

From the list of potential benefits to the emphasis placed on the quality of student writing, Gere's history at this point in composition scholarship doesn't exist solely in the pages of her text. Many conversations have branched out from Gere, and the retellings of Gere's narrative have subsequently influenced the present ideology on peer response inadvertently; thus, creating a dominant narrative on peer response.

In the next section, we will explore Gere and Ching's histories in more detail. By investigating their rhetoric, what will become increasingly more evident is the dominant narrative, as a byproduct of Gere's text, and its connection with expressionistic and social epistemic ideology. Which will lead us to question: exactly how has the latent ideology within the dominant narrative constructed current manifestations of peer response?

## Section 2

Both Gere and Ching's histories can be critiqued, revised, and expanded, which is why I suggest we do not situate one genealogy against the other. As I stated earlier, Gere's history of writing groups is made richer by Ching's alternative history. If I were to disregard one over the other, for example, if I privileged Gere's history, I would be limiting myself to a singular representation of a multifaceted pedagogy. Only through an analogous reading of the two histories are we able to analyze our current peer response practices from a different perspective. Our purpose has been to re-visit peer response and consider the ways in which the telling of its history has affected our perception and implementation of peer response. For this reason, we must read these histories analogously. If we do not, we will continue engaging with peer response as we have been.

After briefly touching upon the underlying theoretical orientations of both Gere's and Ching's texts, we will return to their texts to critically analyze the rhetoric both Ching and Gere employ. The way in which their texts are represented matters: the terms used and the scholarship evoked deliberately positions writing groups in particular theoretical circles. As a result, it can be said that the assumptions and motivations imbedded within any theoretical ideology influence the way in which peer response is practiced. Each theory evoked by either Ching or Gere, plays a different role in how peer response is represented in their genealogies. Moreover, as we have shown, the motivations that spurred expressionist, social epistemic, current-traditional, and cognitivist movements, have influenced both Gere and Ching's perception of peer

response.

We should, prior to analyzing further, the theories Gere and Ching employ, explore the deliberate choices made by Gere and Ching in their narrative histories. Among the writing choices Gere made, I want to highlight the tone of her narrative history. Once we have examined her tone, what will become clearer are the ways in which Gere's narrative history harkens back to expressionist and social epistemic movements. Among the choices Ching made, I want to highlight her focus on pragmatism and peer response. By doing this analytic work first, we will situate ourselves within a conversation about how Gere and Ching chose to situate their histories in ongoing theoretic conversations.

### **The Supposed “Golden Age” of Writing Groups**

When Gere traced writing groups throughout the early history of the academy, she did so to provide the first comprehensive historical account on the subject. In addition to this broader purpose, Gere's exigence became painstakingly clear as the book moves from the telling of history—which we think of as an objective act—to theory and to the implementation of the pedagogy. To investigate the ideology present in Gere's text, we will soon do a close reading of the timeline and “Bibliography,” “Theory,” and “Implication” chapters, but first, we will examine Gere's tone. By arguing that there is ideology present in Gere's text, in addition to arguing that two composition movements had significant influence on Gere's entire narrative and are motivating her argument for a specific model of peer response, I am purposefully drawing attention to the aspects of *Writing Groups* that parallel expressionism and social epistemic theory. This is a deliberate choice on my part to focus on the pieces of Gere's narrative that I believe are

motivated and tied to various tenants of expressionism and social epistemic theory. It is my belief that Gere was supporting her argument for a specific model of peer response with these theories because she perceived the purposes of peer response as a pedagogy as related to the purposes of these two composition movements. Ching in her article did the same by associating the purpose of peer response with the purposes of two other composition movements. The examination of these two narratives is less of an examination to determine which narrative history is “better,” instead we must analyze their narratives to reveal the subjective nature of any narrative. By acknowledging this simple thing, we can begin to open our perception up to additional narratives on peer response, which will broaden our understanding of how multiple persons are understanding and working with this pedagogy.

Now, we will examine the tone of Gere’s timeline. I am borrowing the term “golden age” from Ching’s work and using it to illustrate the difference in tone between the “golden age” period and “dark” period in Gere’s timeline. There is no defined period in the history of writing groups that could legitimately be classified as the “golden age” of writing groups; nonetheless, Gere’s representation of the history of writing groups in both academic and non-academic settings highlights the early years of writing groups in a very positive way. Accordingly, the initial points in Gere’s timeline appear as the highpoint or “golden age” of writing groups, whereas all subsequent points represent the period of decline that followed the supposed “golden age.” As Gere’s audience, we are made to believe that there is a point in the history of writing groups worth recognizing for its superior practices. As indicated by Gere, writing groups that were largely autonomous

and self-initiated are the ideal writing group; thus, writing groups that are functioning semi-autonomously or non-autonomously are inferior to the aforementioned model of writing groups. I am able to come to this conclusion primarily through an investigation of Gere's tone; for example, Gere starts her genealogy with enthusiasm.

In order to classify Gere's tone as enthusiastic, I looked initially at Gere's word choices when she introduced the first points of her timeline. Many of her word choices that describe the purposes of early writing groups or the participants of early writing groups are positively associated with activism. Gere sounded eager to reveal the positive, political work early writing groups had done. For example, Gere writes, "The Zelosophic Society, founded at the University of Pennsylvania in 1892, grew out of student *concern* with President Andrew Jackson's removal of officials from the previous administration" [emphasis mine]. Students are described as "debating" and "discussing" topics such as "Statehood in Kansas" and "U.S. intervention in Cuba" among other political topics (10). Positive associations that represent peer response in this way would have gone unnoticed in my analysis had there been mention of the other uses of peer response at the time. What I take issue with is the deliberate framing of peer response as serving a singular purpose and as being implemented in one way during this time period. I value the history that has been told by Gere; nonetheless, I resist her singular representation, for it privileges this period of peer response by framing the practices as having developed from students' need.

If we turn back to the quoted material, the students who used peer response to mediate change are unidentifiable. They are "students" and peer response is framed as

having helped them all achieve their activist goals. Peer response served those exact students adequately, but we can assume that not every peer response group served every student. We can also assume that there were multiple uses of peer response during this period. Instead of representing peer response groups as serving multiple purposes (beyond student need) or serving a diverse group of students, the representation of peer response in the narrative constructs an image that doesn't disclose other uses for peer response at this time or showcase the ways in which peer response has failed students.

The good work done by earlier writing groups included more than activism, Gere shifted her tone and admonished modern students who take extracurricular opportunities on campus for granted. She writes, "For students of the eighteenth century, social life lacked richness and variety...many other diversions taken for granted by today's students were not available," which is why many writing groups were created (11). Her attitude toward contemporary students is significant; specifically, we should consider her representation of the eighteenth century writing group as an argument for the association between peer response and helpfulness. Gere displays deep regard for the past model of writing group that gave eighteenth century students access to communal activities, which added excitement and enriched their otherwise monotonous student lives. In this quote, she reprimands contemporary students for not being aware of how many extracurricular options they have access to now as compared to eighteenth century students. What we can glean from this quoted material is Gere's perception of peer response groups as filling "social need" on campuses through time. Once more, she has framed past implementations of peer response positively by associating this model of peer response

with helpfulness. Students of the eighteenth century can be understood through this representation of peer response as needing “richness” and “variety” in their studies and being able to obtain these things through the practice of peer response. Couple this representation and the earlier representation that associated peer response with activism, peer response groups can be understood as also enabling students to come together and enact change through group negotiation. Whether or not her framing is intended to suggest peer response had a connection with activism or helpfulness, we should take note that these positive representations present peer response as serving *all* students with little difficulty.

The idea that all students could be served by this pedagogy perpetuates two things: first, the pedagogy is one-size-fits all and second, there are few issues between students and peer response at this time. Her early examples don't touch on the issues of peer response in this period. Perhaps, the research was not there to support that there were issues with peer response, and that would be a reflection on how we have historically not dwelled on the shortcomings of peer response; however, after Gere moved forward from the “golden age” period in the timeline, her tone grew melancholic. I question why Gere would focus solely on the positive at the start of her timeline and then shift to focusing on the negative for the remainder of her timeline. I do agree with her that peer response, after being integrated into the academy, was a marginalized practice; nonetheless, there were positives in the “dark” periods and negatives in the “golden age” that were not included in the timeline, which is representative of a deliberate choice being made to frame peer response in a certain way.

Gere's tone at the end of her timeline is melancholic. She described writing groups as "existing on the edges of educational consciousness" (52). Frequently, Gere used words like "periphery" (52) or "marginality" (30) to describe the place of writing groups in the academy. Her tone by the end of her timeline is stark, nearly depressed, as she admitted to the marginality of a pedagogy that she deeply values. As a result, the points in the timeline after Gere's golden age are difficult to read and leave the reader with less to be excited about.

Indeed Gere's tone throughout the timeline is indicative of admiration for the "golden age" of writing groups, but what is even more revealing of Gere's attachment to the earlier writing groups are Gere's exclusion of certain points in the history of writing groups. Specifically, the exclusion of the pragmatic points in the history of writing groups that Ching had focused on in her article. While Gere does mention these points at the end of her text in a bibliography, the brevity of the descriptions is symptomatic of her deliberate choice to construct a timeline that represented peer response in a certain way. For example, if we compare Gere's introduction to the bibliography, we find contradictory information which supports my assumption that Gere chose to exclude certain "contradictory" points in her timeline.

First, Gere begins her introduction to the bibliography by saying "the following is a chronological listing of books and articles about writing groups. It documents their history, as well as recommendations for and benefits assigned to these groups" (125), which is an accurate representation of the bibliography; however, there is also some unusual framing happening in these sentences. Specifically, the following books and

articles do document the history of writing groups, which is what Gere tells us they do. Yet, they document a different history than the one Gere initially constructed in her text. Gere highlighted student autonomy as the first point in her timeline, but the bibliography began with an article, geared toward educators and inspired by teacher concerns, that suggested teachers were interested in getting their students to read and “criticize one another’s” academic works (126). The content of the two starting points is of interest here because Gere could have constructed her bibliography in the same tone as her timeline: both could have highlighted the early period of writing groups that is positively associated with activism and helpfulness; however, she did not do so. Instead, she chose to include and acknowledge points in the history of writing groups where peer response was being used to address teacher concerns, such as paper load. As a result, we have two different timelines that paint two different pictures. We have Gere’s initial timeline that constructed a narrative of prosperity and then decline, and we have a timeline that gave a broader picture of how writing groups could be imbricated with ideology from various theories and fields. In a word, Gere appears aware of her purpose and has constructed her main timeline to further convince her audience of the history that agrees with her later argument for the implementation of peer response.

### **Expressionism and Social Epistemic Theory in *Writing Groups***

Before reentering Gere’s text, we have not up until this point fleshed out expressionism or social epistemic theory, or what classifies Gere’s rhetoric as noticeably falling within those schools of thought. Expressionism is often critiqued for its alleged romantic orientation; nonetheless, at the time, expressionists sought to empower their students

through “unconventional” means, which from a modern perspective are less “unconventional” as they were innovative. Despite criticism, expressionists worked to destabilize a rigid rhetorical model that regulated who was worthy enough to study writing. Writing had traditionally been seen as a skill few could develop, and even if one found themselves able to study writing, years of study would be required for the person to master the art form. Dispelling the “genius myth,” or the idea that some had writing ability where others did not, and encouraging all to write were some of the motivations for expressionists (Berlin 484).

Expressionism’s ideological concern was with the practice of writing without the individual self in mind. In order to address this concern, expressionists sought to empower the individual writer and encouraged them to seek their “authentic nature” through writing. Through the process of writing, specifically in the creation of original works of writing inspired by personal experience, an individual could begin to discover Truths about themselves (Berlin 485). Truth was important for the individual to grasp, as it would aid in their development as an individual.

Much of what made expressionism unique and powerful, were the ways in which it encouraged and empowered writers. By facilitating a writer to find their unique voice, instructors of writing gave students the opportunity to claim power. With this new found power students could enact change. Included in this theory were also elements of nonconformity, and perhaps that was due to the heavy criticism that expressionism incurred; nonetheless, members of this movement encouraged their students to resist conformity (Berlin 486).

Comparatively, social epistemic theory was especially concerned with the production of knowledge in social terms. Though scholars within this movement do not always agree with one another, all “share a notion of rhetoric as a political act involving a dialectical interaction engaging the material, the social, and the individual writer” (488). In other words, social epistemic scholars noticed the circular relationship among language, individuals, and the social world. They concluded that knowledge is produced, maintained, and challenged by “observers” who are constantly negotiating with the social world. To say that something is “socially constructed” is only part of a social epistemic argument that seeks to draw attention to how involved individuals are in the construction of knowledge at a specific time and in a specific culture (Berlin 488).

If Gere’s purpose was to positively represent a period where student autonomy in student initiated writing groups was the “norm,” then how does this relate to expressionism and social epistemic ideology and theory? In brief, Gere’s deliberate attention to this period is related to her understanding of how writing groups should be implemented in the classroom. By doing a close reading of both the “Theory” and “Implication” chapters, it became painstakingly clear that Gere is calling for instructors of writing to model our writing groups after the supposed “golden age” writing groups. We might think initially that the suggestions Gere made in her text would have little effect on the larger body of work written on peer response; however, as the only comprehensive text on peer response, Gere’s suggestions have a significant impact on her contemporaries, as well as those scholars who published after her. It is important that we consider exactly what she is suggesting if we are to investigate how Gere’s narrative has

pervaded and affected contemporary peer response practices.

The third chapter of the book, “Theory,” regards writing groups as having a distinct “educational purpose;” specifically, Gere writes, “writing groups, both within and beyond academic institutions, exist as vehicles for learning, for helping individuals improve their writing” (55). This statement alone leaves little room for analysis, as most could agree that the approach to teaching writing with writing groups does aim to serve this educational purpose. With that being said, Gere states later in the chapter that writing groups and the “learner-centered activities” that occur within writing groups encourage collaboration. Gere writes, “Collaboration ameliorates alienation” and argues that writing groups, because of their collaborative practices and student-focused method of instruction, will create a less alienating learning environment for students (68). These statements read together are revealing of the connection between Gere’s text and the expressionist movement, specifically, the aspect of the expressionist movement that disenfranchises the teacher by suggesting their presence changes the dynamic of the peer response group.

Over the span of the third chapter, Gere links student alienation to instructor presence or dominance. As a result, her argument does not address the specific drawbacks of semi-autonomous or non-autonomous writing groups, instead her argument, in order to argue for autonomous writing groups, focuses on the connection between instructor involvement and students feeling alienated in their writing groups. Gere suggested that peers and instructors are from differing “linguistic communities.” She suggests that students, sharing similar languages, could speak to one another and

would “feel less alienated from the language they use” (68). By suggesting that student share similar languages, Gere is also suggesting that instructors and students do not share similar languages. For this reason, students could feel more alienated in a group where their instructor is significantly involved. Expressionist theories about writing groups are once again evoked in this representation. Although these statements exist in a chapter that is meant to tell the audience all of the theory behind writing groups, there is a felt sense that the teacher-less groups imagined by the expressionism movement are being promoted and developed by Gere.

But how does Gere’s representation associate with expressionism and social epistemic ways of thought? Gere’s “golden” writing group model is similar to a conversation that hinged upon the idea of the “teacherless classroom.” Peter Elbow, notable in both the expressionism and social epistemic parties, wrote *Writing Without Teachers*. It’s evident from the similarities between the ideas in Elbow’s text and Gere’s text that Gere was highly influenced by Elbow. The teacherless classroom Elbow imagined would not have an authoritative figure explaining what was effective or ineffective about a piece of writing. Instead there would be a group of students who would read your writing and explain to you the experience they had while reading your writing (77). Elbow’s model intended to give the writer an opportunity to experience their writing as their audience had. Through this process, a student could live their writing through another and this would enable the writer to revise effectively. Gere may not have pictured the same end result as Elbow; however, it is significant that she would argue for a model created by one of the most notable scholars in expressionism and social

epistemic theory. Gere's evocation of Elbow situated her conversation about peer response within a larger conversation that Elbow began with his book, and in doing so Gere established a connection between a writing group's purpose with expressionist ideas. I stress the significance of Gere's connection to Elbow because it is important to recognize that writing groups historically were either wholly autonomous or semi-autonomous. Gere does argue for autonomous groups over semi-autonomous groups, and yet there is no evidence that one was "better" than the other. Nonetheless, we get a distinct sense from Gere's considerable nod to Elbow's "teacherless classroom" that there is a difference between autonomous groups and semi-autonomous groups. Therefore, the inclusion and adoption of Elbow's theories further cements Gere's text in expressionistic theories.

Deviating from our earlier conversation above, Gere further tangled the theory behind writing groups with expressionism and social epistemic thought when she situated writing groups within theories of knowledge that supported collaborative efforts in composition classrooms.

In accordance with social epistemic ways of talking and thinking about knowledge, Gere argued that collaborative learning in writing groups hinges upon the acknowledgment of Knowledge as being socially constructed (72). In *Writing Groups*, Gere detailed the opposing way of thinking about knowledge production. She wrote, "a fixed and hierarchical view of knowledge... assumes that learning can occur only when a designated 'knower' imparts wisdom to those less well informed." By trying to distance her audience from this type of rigid thinking, Gere argues that writing groups, in order to

be successful, must first believe that through collaboration one will develop their own understanding of writing. She argues that in the writing group there should not be one “designated ‘knower.’” For the peer response group to function properly, no one person in the group should assume that knower position, even if a student is the one trying to assume the position of power.

Gere’s representation of writing groups as sites of communal knowledge production firmly cement her representation in social epistemic theory, which is in no way a negative; however, what’s important to recognize is Gere’s earlier regard for autonomy. The designated knower could easily translate into teacher/instructor, which is why I argue that Gere is situating her history within this theory due to the interrelatedness of social epistemic theory and democratic teaching. Which is to say that Gere is setting up a larger argument when she included Elbow. Gere posits that if a teacher joins a writing group as a member, the teacher’s knowledge will be seen as superior in some way, and alienate members of the group, which will in turn spoil the power dynamic of the group. In essence, any teacher would become the knower or the chief authority and the writing group would fall back into the rigid type of thinking that positions one knower above the rest (72-73).

Gere’s final section, “Implications,” endeavored to provide readers with applications for writing groups that had practical inclinations. For this reason, this section undoubtedly represents Gere’s theoretical leanings because in her pursuit of illustrating ways to effectively implement writing groups, Gere imagines rigid categories for writing groups. While she does not intend to pass judgment on autonomous, semi-autonomous, or

non-autonomous writing groups—moreover, this section is not meant to read as a “formula” for writing groups—Gere certainly favors one type of writing group over the others and argued for this writing group’s effectiveness in democratizing positions of power within the writing classroom. As a result, we as her audience begin to become aware of what’s being sold to us: the “golden age writing group” or the *autonomous* writing group.

Much like our earlier analysis of the timeline and bibliography, an analysis of the “Implications” chapter also reveals how highly regarded autonomy is by Gere. Gere’s respect for autonomous groups lie in her assumption that autonomous groups are made up of individuals who are “willing,” which is to say those who join autonomous groups made a deliberate choice to join and have done so of their own free will (101). Further, Gere attributes to members of autonomous groups characteristics such as respectfulness or trustworthiness. Her representation of peer response participants is based in the assumption that believes students who had a choice in the development of a group would be willing participants. For example, the eighteenth century writing groups that were developed by students for students were made up of willing participants. We can assume this because those students chose to create those groups. Therefore, Gere argues for autonomy or semi-autonomy because she associates autonomy with willingness and other characteristics such as respectfulness and trustworthiness. All of these characteristics are important to a peer response group’s success because willing, respectful, and trustworthy participants are more likely to willingly relinquish their authority over their writing and distribute that authority to others in the group so that all may develop their writing ability

(101). The image that Gere constructs of autonomous writing groups is appealing. Yet, we should set aside what is appealing about it and focus first on what this singular representation could be silencing. Specifically, the experiences where students in autonomous groups or semi-autonomous groups were not treated respectfully or experiences where students, despite having a choice in the writing group, acted as unwilling participants. Perhaps if we had access to all of those narratives at once, contemporary peer response scholarship would not be based in assumptions that are not always necessarily true. Assuming willingness, for example, is dangerous, for if we assume all our students are willing to participate we may not focus on how to motivate our students. As well, assuming respectfulness or trustworthiness from our students is equally problematic. Students may not approach their peers with respect and our students may not trust their peers, which is why we must consult alternative narratives alongside Gere. Her narrative is fundamental to peer response; nonetheless, that does not mean we should consult few other narratives. We must entertain many narratives, even if they conflict with each other, in order to understand peer response more fully.

The appeal of the autonomous writing group is developed further when Gere details how this particular type of writing group could empower nearly all students from all backgrounds. But “success” in Gere’s terms can only be achievable through the abdication of authority. In addition to this, there cannot exist within the group an absolute authority. That is, most literary societies and mutual improvement groups did not have persons with the similar authoritative power that a teacher has in their own classroom. This illustration of the golden writing group presents a problem: while the perfection of

autonomy Gere constructs is alluring, there is no practicality to the image. I would go as far to say a wholly autonomous writing group is impossible, that the construction of such a pretty image for writing groups is not grounded in possibility. Gere admits defeat by conceding to the fact that the classroom environment is a hospitable habitat for either semi-autonomous or non-autonomous writing groups, yet she still presents the golden visage of the autonomous group. For what reason might she have done so? One possibility is that the perfect image gives educators something to strive for; however, the image Gere constructs can be read differently. Gere appears to be constructing a formula for the “good” writing group, which Gere promised she did not have early on in her text.

For example, writing groups in peer response exercises are mainly semi-autonomous or non-autonomous in part, because peer response in contemporary classrooms has significant instructor involvement. Teachers of writing can be involved with peer response exercises by modeling feedback, providing worksheets or supplemental materials for students, and/or sitting in on the exercises. In many cases, the instructor, after having prepped their students, assumes the role of a proctor during peer response exercises and monitors the conversations taking place. The problem in these groups, per Gere’s text, lies in students not being able to fully “experience the empowerment of using language collaboratively to generate new understandings because the instructor fails to give them the authority to do so” (101). Which is to say, students in these groups can experience a bit of what an autonomous group experiences when they engage with one another, but there are factors enabling semi-autonomous and non-autonomous groups such as how groups are decided, how groups are prepared, and the

classroom environment. Groups in classrooms are typically chosen by instructors, prepared by instructors, and classroom environments are constructed and managed by instructors. Accordingly, the instructor is the absolute authority in these groups, as the work done in any writing group will, ultimately, be turned into the instructor for consideration (102). This framing of writing groups articulates two things: the first, complete autonomy has some sort of correlation with willing students and second, “good” writing groups are groups that attempt to be as autonomous as possible, that is, if we were to scale writing groups autonomous groups are perfection and non-autonomous groups are failed writing groups.

### **Current-Traditional Rhetoric and Cognitivist Theory**

Insofar as the conversations on current-traditional rhetoric detail, the origin of current-traditional rhetoric is not easily identifiable in the same way as other composition movements. For this reason, current-traditional rhetoric is difficult to conceptualize if the rhetorical models that make up this school of thought are thought of as “static” (Connors 208).

Comparatively, current-traditional rhetoric should be understood as a living and evolving theory with roots extending back to antiquated rhetorics. We should understand current-traditional rhetoric in such terms being that we do not want to solely associate current-traditional rhetoric with the past. Often current-traditional rhetoric is thought of in this way and to think of it as a figure of the past ignores how current-traditional rhetorics have persisted, evolved, and take shape in contemporary scholars’ writings.

Although current-traditional theories and conversations do stretch seemingly ever

on back in time, the association with these more “traditional” rhetorics with “old” ideas has effectively lessened the value of current-traditional rhetoric in contemporary classrooms. Where expressionist models were degraded for “experimentality,” current-traditional rhetoric models are in a similar situation, for they are considered obsolete models, too centered on prescriptive grammar and usage rules (Connors 210).

However, as D. Gold concluded in his text *the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, “current-traditional rhetoric has become a convenient catchphrase and catchall for whatever historical pedagogical practices we have deemed reductive, impolitic, or inelegant ” (qtd. in Garrison 318). The pedagogical practices Gold references include, but are not limited to: memorization, modeling, recitation, revision practices focused on correction, and invention. One could say that current-traditional rhetoric is typically concerned with “substance” and “style;” as well, a notable characteristic of this rhetorical model is how multifaceted it is. What is included under the broader term of current-traditional rhetoric is vast; however, the purposes of those who fall under this broad category operate under the presumption that teachers are tasked to teach our students and our students can be taught. Within this logic is a power dynamic that positions the teacher in the position of giving knowledge to their students.

Cognitivists, on the other hand, placed significant emphasis on the logical and scientific aspects of learning and writing development. Cognitivist such as Flower and Hayes in their article, “A Cognitive Process of Theory of Writing,” determined and established, via the data they collected in their study, the steps writers take in the composing process. While these steps have no established order and may be repeated as

desired, the writing process in the minds of cognitivist largely was made up of the “planning stage,” “translating stage,” and “reviewing stage” (Berlin 481). Another facet of this movement was the idea that goals motivated writers to continue through the writing process. The majority of scholarship focused on how peer response groups work operate from this cognitivist principle on goals. Peer response scholars assume that students will establish goals and those goals would encourage students to continue through the writing process. Certain cognitivists argue that writers create goals and then work to realize them. Structure was equally important to cognitivists and many thought “good” writers would create texts with structured arguments, as the mind worked in a similar way. One of the most important aspects of this theory, which claims to have no ideological orientation, is the aspect of cognitivist theory that encourages a hierarchical structure that would place persons with greater ability in expert roles.

Much like a meritocracy, experts roles exist and are important to the learning environment in a hierarchical structure. In this structure, experts in a certain subject matter would, presumably, have greater power over those who are not considered expert in that subject matter. The power experts have in this structure is not meant to be extensive; consequently, experts would only have authority over the subject matter they are expert in. Ching uses this exact logic to argue for an increase of instructor presence in the writing group. Instructors, in Ching’s representations, would inhabit the expert role and from the position they would aid in students’ writing development. With this in mind, we must understand Ching’s timeline is connected to theory in the same way Gere’s timeline was. Both histories are motivated by particular theoretical movements, for this

reason we must read their narratives as subjective rather than objective.

Later in this section we will focus more closely on the pervasiveness of Gere's narrative on contemporary scholarship; nonetheless, it is important to note now how important it is to understand the subjective nature of both Gere and Ching's narratives. I hope that by classifying both narratives as subjective, we will give Ching's timeline as much authority as Gere's timeline. That is to say, Gere is typically seen as the sole authority on this subject and I encourage us to think otherwise. Gere is fundamental, but so are other persons writing on peer response, which is why I suggest we entertain multiple narratives (484-486).

### **The Reality Within the Supposed "Golden Age"**

From the previous explanation on current-traditional rhetoric and cognitivist theories, Ching's connection to these rhetorics may seem unclear. Earlier we addressed how there is a misconception about current-traditional rhetoric and cognitivist rhetoric and how both ways of thought are typically seen as outmoded. One may assume that these "older" ideas could not exist in contemporary scholarship; nonetheless, Ching orients her analysis of Gere's text within these theoretical conversations. To put it briefly, Ching's purpose was to re-evaluate Gere's original genealogy and to establish an alternative genealogy that would highlight the connection between peer response and seemingly disparate ways of thinking that have, up until this point, not been associated with peer response. As Gere's timeline was grounded in certain ideology, so was Ching's timeline; although, Ching argued for the abandonment of expressionist binaries present in Gere's timeline. Ching argues that only after we have done this, and separated peer response from the

“rules” of expressionism that position teachers and student in opposition from each other, can we begin to reimagine peer response. Ching’s ultimate goal is to reimagine peer response in current-traditional and cognitivist terms to disassociate peer response from theories and ideas that negate instructor involvement in peer response exercises.

In order to argue for more instructor involvement in peer response exercises, Ching first constructs her alternative history, which she uses to evidence how closely related the history of writing groups is to current-traditional rhetoric and cognitivist theory. We have already summarized her genealogy at length earlier, now, we will do a close reading of her final section, “Rethinking Agency in Peer Response.” This particular section holds the bulk of her argument and is revealing of the theory that underlines Ching’s message. Although Ching’s narrative is not the typical narrative associated with peer response, reading her narrative while keeping in mind the theories she situated her argument in is important, for when we entertain multiple narratives we must be aware of the ideology that is present within the argument.

The expressionist binaries in question that Gere employs are “student autonomy” and “teacher authority.” Where Gere puts them in opposition, Ching argued for a dismantling of these binaries. In Gere’s text, Ching writes, “authority is figured as a finite commodity, a resource that one either does or does not possess” (313), which is to say that if an instructor is involved with a writing group, their presence and authority would negate student autonomy. However, by way of cognitivist theory, Ching argues for instructor presence and asserts that their presence will not negate student autonomy, but instead transform the writing group into something similar to an apprenticeship (314). As

a result, students in this augmented writing group would work alongside their instructor and take an active role in their writing development. In this way, Ching uses principles from cognitivist theory to reimagine the teacher's role in writing groups.

Ching further supports this claim by linking a developed modeling approach imbued with current-traditional rhetorical properties with similar collaborative learning theories as the ones found in Gere. The top-down model of instruction is thought to be synonymous with current-traditional rhetoric; however, as Ching details “students do not learn *from* teachers or *from* peers, but rather by engaging in the practices of writing and reading alongside both” (315). The quoted material may seem disparate from the top-down model and more akin to social epistemic thinking, but as I mentioned earlier current-traditional rhetoric is not static. Rather the model that allows students to learn from both their peers and their instructors without infringing upon their authority or autonomy is an amalgamated model grounded in current-traditional modeling practices.

What we can glean from this re-reading of Ching are her theoretical leanings toward cognitivism and current-traditional rhetoric. As I stated earlier, reading Ching's narrative is important because we should be able to recognize the way in which theory is imbedded in an argument. The motivations and agendas of the ideology being evoked are related to the message the argument is trying to communicate.

In the case of Ching's article, her exigence was to motivate teachers to take part in their students' writing groups. The theory she engaged with in her article is traditionally understood as older or outmoded; however, when we consider Ching's message and the theory as interrelated, we notice that cognitivism and current-traditional theory still have

a place in contemporary scholarship. Moreover, Ching's article should be seen as equal to Gere's text because their theoretical differences do not make either any less valid. If we are trying to entertain multiple narratives on peer response, we need scholars to differ in opinion, but we also need to read them critically or we may miss the assumptions or agendas present in any article.

### **Echoes of Gere: the Dominant Narrative**

We will now analyze a contemporary web article about how to practice or teach peer response. In this analysis, I will highlight how the theoretical "talk" on peer response does not echo Ching's alternative narrative on peer response. What will become apparent in this analysis is how contemporary peer response scholarship echoes Gere's timeline. As a result, contemporary scholarship can be seen as existing inside a dominant narrative on peer response that connects back to the assumptions made in Gere's text. We will also see in Pamela Flash's article "Creating effective peer response workshops," the similarities between her framing and Gere's. Specifically, Gere and Flash share the same assumptions about what makes peer response "successful."

We will focus on the few primary aspects of the dominant narrative: alienation and confidence, student engagement, and instructor presence. First, we will analyze how alienation and confidence are continuously linked to peer response. Flash writes, "because they [students] are able to act on their peers' feedback prior to turning a draft over to an instructor, they have had a chance to improve that second draft and are able to feel less vulnerable to "attack." Similar to the student Gere had in mind, Flash's students will feel more comfortable and confident after having met with their peers, for they can

relate to their peers in a way they cannot relate to their instructor. Flash's use of "attack" paints a picture of a tyrannical authoritative presence—the instructor of writing. Gere does not equate instructor critique to an attack on students, but Gere's narrative does articulate the disempowerment that students felt when being critiqued by only their teacher. Flash's conversation is contemporary, but this conversation can also be linked to older iterations on peer response ("Creating Effective Peer Response" 2015).

We can continue seeing a connection between Flash and Gere when we look at how student engagement is imagined in both texts as "excited" and/or "willing." Flash writes, "...excitement is generated by participating in an activity involving simultaneous conversation about writing. Students hold each other accountable and are offered incentives to invest themselves in their writing" ("Creating Effective Peer Response" 2015). Here in Flash's statement, we see the pervasive thought that students would be willing and ready to talk about writing. There is little mention of frustration or any other emotions other than excitement. As Gere assumed, the participants of writing groups would value the experience of peer response, so do the contemporary scholars of today.

Finally, we will focus on instructor presence and how it is still perceived as negative to the overall peer response experience. Flash writes, "Peer workshops are student-centered; instructors need to temporarily remove themselves from the center of attention. In order to succeed, the workshopping process should allow groups or pairs to work independently" ("Creating Effective Peer Response" 2015). Flash along with the bulk of contemporary scholarship has evolved from Gere's no instructor policy to a minimal instructor influence policy. Although there is a slight change from Gere to

contemporary opinion, instructors are still considered to hamper the overall peer response experience. As we see in Flash's statement, teachers are still considered as captivating all attention, which like authority in Gere's text, is also seen as a finite resource.

What we can take away from this brief reading of Flash's 2015 article is the similarities between the current theoretical "talk" about peer response and how it has changed from the theoretical "talk" in Gere's text, but in minor ways. The majority of contemporary articles written on peer response are talking as Gere talked in 1987. I suspect we will continue to talk as such unless we begin to consult alternative ways of thinking about this pedagogy. Theoretical "talk" may seem unimportant, yet as we have seen in this section Gere and Ching's conversations are laced with theory imbricated with ideology.

Gere and Ching's agenda are manifold. I encourage us to see their writing choices as deliberate, and to read their histories as intentional tellings that sought to further situate peer response exercises in theories that aligned with their own exigences. We've determined in this section that Gere's ideas and frameworks are what have prevailed and formed the dominant narrative on peer response. Even though Ching's ideas are not as widespread, reading her article as we did is illustrative of how any argument could be grounded in the ideological concerns of theoretical movement. Gere and Ching both grounded their texts in different theory, which resulted in different narrative histories. With this in mind, we can move forward knowing that Gere and Ching's ideas and narratives are grounded in theory, which should change how we approach their timelines. I suggest we read them as being motivated and intimately connected to theory and we

should not read their histories as objective. I do not want any one scholar to have the authority on peer response, instead I hope we can consider multiple narratives and representations of peer response. In the next section, we will explore the consequences of how we've understood peer response up until this point by analyzing more contemporary articles written for new teachers of writing.

### Section 3

Up to this point, we have explored sources that either Gere and Ching have engaged with in their scholarly works. Certainly, these sources served the purpose of establishing one major point in my argument: the ideas and theoretical “talk” found in Gere’s narrative are pervasive. In other words, Gere’s ideas on peer response continue to be widely accepted by contemporary peer response scholars. In addition to this, Gere’s narrative remains the primary narrative on the subject of peer response. You will find in the body of literature on peer response, scholars who use Gere and her timeline as a primary reference point in their modern texts, as her text is still the only comprehensive text on the history of peer response. Therefore, contemporary ways of thinking about peer response fall in the same vein as Gere’s text, which evidences how overall, we compositionists have typically thought about peer response in one way for quite some time. We will notice in this section how texts written specifically for teachers of writing are giving out advice for implementing peer response in the classroom that parallels the advice Gere gave in her text, *Writing Groups*.

In essence, Gere is difficult to avoid in peer response scholarship and her ideas, assumptions, and expressionist agenda continue to go unchallenged, and as a result, peer response scholarship appears to have a difficult time separating itself from Gere. Peer response scholars treat Gere’s text as if it has authority or ownership on the subject, which is perhaps why the ideas within the text are so widespread and seemingly unchallengeable.

What I mean to establish is quite simple: Ching’s narrative is not new by any

means, but it is uncommon. There is a dominant way that we think about peer response and as we continue on throughout this project, the dominant narrative on peer response will reveal itself to be made up of certain variables, and these variables will feel familiar as they are the variables Gere imagined when she constructed the perfect image or “golden” peer response group. In order to investigate how pervasive Gere’s ideas are and establish how the “talk” about peer response is affecting our implementation of the pedagogy, we first need to explain how we are approaching the academic sources in this section, for what is unique about this section are the types of sources being consulted and the equally unique way one must approach less “formal” types of texts.

I find it helpful to think about many of these sources as “teacher aids,” for they are texts that are either written with an instructor of writing in mind or they have been given to me in pedagogy focused courses with the intent that these sources could aid me or prepare me for teaching writing. With this in mind, the information we come across can be read entirely as advice, which is what makes these sources particularly rich because unlike other, perhaps, more formal articles or books, advice oriented texts have a common purpose: to write from the trenches, so to speak, and give the most practical, usable advice to the teacher.

Our lens considers this common purpose and also keeps the variables Gere imagined for the perfect writing group close. Briefly, Gere thought that the supposed “golden age” of writing groups could be broken down into a few variables. 1) A successful peer response group would be made up of students who could easily talk to one another. 2) A successful peer response would be made up of students who had a

personal stake in their writing. 3) A successful peer response group would be wholly autonomous, which would mean groups would be entirely student run without the involvement of an instructor. These variables equaled “success” for Gere, and as we will see, peer response scholarship continues to give advice with these terms in mind.

Moreover, these three variables are venerated in peer response scholarship, so much so that successful peer response has become solely imagined within these terms. Therefore, I argue that the scholarship on peer response, like Gere, values autonomy to the extent that autonomy becomes a requirement of peer response, which is to say, in the scope of composition scholarship without some sort of autonomy, peer response is no longer meeting the objectives of peer response. Just the same happens when you remove the variable of “investment” or personal stake in writing, as peer response (and as the dominant narrative in scholarship on the subject tells us) cannot be successful without students’ personal investment in their work. Our primary goal is to explore each of these “necessary” variables in detail by examining sources that essentially seek to give teachers’ advice on how to achieve and/or maintain these variables inside our own writing group exercises.

The first article comes from the 2002 text, *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, edited by Duane Roen, Veronica Pantoja, Lauren Yena, Susan K. Miller, and Eric Waggoner. Fiona Paton’s article from this text, titled “Approaches to Productive Peer Review,” sought to discuss peer review in the context of the composition class. Paton’s text is framed as “advice” and has detailed “guidelines” on how one might approach peer response, guidelines which have been formed and developed “over the

course of [Paton's] own teaching and represents much trial and error," but these guidelines are equally reminiscent of Gere's variables as well (290).

We are led to believe that Paton has done the legwork and has solid advice that has been tried and tested. What's significant about this source is its connection to Gere's "successful" peer response group model, that is, Paton argues, as many before her have, for the anxiety relieving properties of peer response. This is an argument that comes up frequently in peer response scholarship; moreover, the significance of this argument lies in Paton's assumption that peer response exercises have anxiety relieving properties for students. For instance, Paton assumes students would feel more comfortable talking around their peers about their writing as opposed to talking about to their teacher about their writing. Gere assumed the same; she concluded that students have common ground as peers, which would make peer-to-peer interaction easier. Paton's argument is based in Gere's idea that peers talking to peers is less anxiety inducing than students talking with teachers. Paton's assumption about peers can be thought of as representing the deep roots that bind her argument to Gere's text. Paton may not be intentionally trying to reproduce Gere's assumptions in her own article; nonetheless, there is little she can do to avoid Gere's ideas and assumptions, as there are few who have done the extensive work that Gere has on peer response.

Looking closer at her article, Paton writes, "As we go around the circle and share our comments, we often find that we have similar ideas...They begin to acknowledge that their peers have helpful, constructive comments...they realized that we could all help each other in the process of writing" (309). Here Paton has illustrated a wary peer response

group whose members are wary of their peers. While this is dissimilar to Gere's ideal peer response group model in the sense that the peers were not comfortable at first, Paton's peer response group begins to evolve into Gere's image after Paton's students begin to give their comments. Paton's reflection on her classroom experience is an argument for the connection between the type of interactions happening among peer response members and the reduction of anxiety. Paton uses her student's experience to support the assumption that peers can comfortably talk to each other with little help or encouragement from the instructor. We can interpret from her earlier quoted statement that though students were uncomfortable at first, they *all* realized how helpful this exercise could be and *naturally* began to give and received feedback. As an article focused on giving advice to the instructor of writing, Paton is encouraging instructors to play a passive role in the writing group. Associating the process of peers giving and receiving feedback with innateness positively represents the pedagogy, which further establishes peer response as a successful approach to teaching writing, but the association also encourages little teacher involvement as possible. As a result, students who do not communicate with their peers easily, naturally, or comfortably are ignored. Their experience does not have a place in the narrative in the success narrative Gere and others have perpetuated. Thus, it is important that we consider how we've talked about peer response and how that has impacted how we are teaching it now.

As I stated earlier, the association between peer response and relieving writing anxiety, which is a term used to describe the fear a writer experiences while writing, is a common conversation (Kurt and Atay 13). Gökçe Kurt and Derin Atay argue in their

article on this subject and, like Paton, they argue that peer response can be used to reduce the writing anxiety students have. Similar to Paton, Kurt and Atay conclude that peer response exercises place students in conversation with one another, which is anxiety reducing. Once more, we find elements of Gere's assumptions within their conclusion.

Scholars who study writing anxiety have determined that it stems from misconceptions about the writing process; specifically, the misconception that writing is an individual activity. As a result of this misconception, students feel as if "they are deprived of help, support and encouragement" while writing (13). Kurt and Atay explored peer response groups and their ability to relieve writing related anxiety in their article. Among their findings, they asserted the following: "peer feedback also leads to a reduction in writer apprehension and an increase in writer confidence" (15). Their claim is supported by a common interpretation of the functionality of a peer response group. Kurt and Atay assume, like Gere, that responding to student work involves students coming together and discovering that they are not so different from their peers. Essentially, the thought is that students will always be able to connect with their peers; therefore, the interaction among them will reduce feelings of distress and loneliness that stem from writing anxiety.

Gere writes "collaboration in writing groups addresses alienation by providing writers opportunities to explore their linguistic community in the company of members of that community...writers experience a new intimacy with their own words" (68). Gere's representation of peer interactions seems to have mystical properties, for her explanation of the process suggests writers enter a writing group and automatically find themselves at

home within it. She based students' innate connection with one another on language. She argued that students and teachers spoke in much different ways, which is why students could naturally speak with one another when they came together on account of their shared language. Additionally, Gere assumed that students share similar problems and concerns that they could talk to each other about in their shared language; although this is true in many cases, Gere and other scholars, along with Kurt and Atay, construct peer response in these terms to establish a point about peer response. Peer response, in their minds, is a successful and viable practice because it places students who can naturally connect with each other into conversation with one another. One of Gere's variables for a successful peer response group encouraged the logic present in Kurt and Atay's article. It is not surprising that many contemporary scholars maintain the impact of peer response as a pedagogy that can provide student writers a safe community, one made up of like students who can relate to them in ways that an instructor could not.

As we saw in an earlier statement made by Kurt and Atay, peer response groups allegedly bring students together and help them to realize their writing concerns. In addition to this, Kurt and Atay also purport that students share similar issues and writing concerns as their peers. Both claims assume students have common ground with their peers *because they are all students*. Earlier, we consulted the association with peer response groups and the reduction of anxiety; however, within Kurt and Atay's article, there is another similarity between their talk about peer response and Gere's supposed golden image of peer response, specifically, in their conversation about confidence. Kurt and Atay argued that the meeting and negotiating with one's peers reduces anxiety, but

also argued the process also builds one's confidence. Gere's assumption that Kurt and Atay are basing their conclusion on, purports students will realize that others in the group are at the same level as they are and become empowered by that realization. As a result, students will be more confident in their writing because their peers are in the same position as they are and that is comforting. It would seem that Kurt and Atay's assumptions about students are contingent upon Gere's earlier assumption that peers will always relate to peers and be affected positively by these interactions. This concept exists in contemporary scholarship, and its pervasiveness is evidenced by how the variable is treated as fact within arguments, yet these so called facts about peer response read more like fact-myths when we encounter student accounts on the practice.

Gere, Paton, and Kurt and Atay did not form their assumptions about peer response without cause, as there are many accounts of peer response having anxiety relieving properties. As well, peer response has long been attributed with empowering students in addition to helping students develop their awareness of writing conventions; nonetheless, we rarely consider alternative narratives that challenge how peer response is typically represented. As we see time and time again, peer response is reduced down to how Gere, Paton, Kurt and Atay, and others have framed it. This type of singular thinking excludes the students who find peer response to be anxiety inducing or disenfranchising.

Susan K. Miller's article "Using Group Conferences to Respond to Essays in Progress" argues in the same vein as both Kurt, Atay, and Gere. Miller's main point in her article stems from Gere's principle that student and teacher comments are perceived by students as inherently different. As we well know, Gere believed peers could relate to

each other with their common language and she assumed there was not a similar shared language between instructor and student; rather, instructor and student were seen as operating within a power differential. The instructor in this power differential is represented as having greater power than their student. This relationship, and the negative connotation Gere applied to it, is equally pervasive. Miller argued, “The confidence level in the classroom rises...they realize that we could all help each other in the process of writing” (309). While her peer response exercise included more instructor involvement, her argument falls within the confines of the dominant way of thinking about peer response and maintains Gere’s assumption and argues peer response will be successful and empower all students because students will come to be aware of how helpful and impactful their comments can be on their peers’ writing. Negotiations between student to student are made possible because we assume, as Gere told us, that our students will have some sort of shared connection. But this may not always be true, yet Miller doesn’t give you any advice on how to manage a peer response group whose members do not feel empowered or comfortable talking. Instead Miller opted, as other scholars have, to argue for the successes of peer response and exclude the possibility of failure.

In another article, it is argued that responding to another student’s writing is “easier than you might imagine.” They argue in their text “Strategies for Successful Writing” for the approachability of peer response for students, as it is a pedagogical approach that isn’t as difficult as it might seem primarily because students share common ground with one another (70). Reinking and Osten acknowledge the common fear that writing students have toward peer response; namely, there are cases in which students have expressed

anxiety toward peer response groups because of their assumed unfamiliarity with critique. Reinking and Osten's assumption addressed the fear students might have toward peer response and attempted to negate it by assuring students that despite a lack of formal knowledge of writing, students would know how to "identify problems." In Reinking and Osten's opinion, peer response activities require students to solely "identify problems, not solve them" (70). Although at the same time, I argue that Reinking and Osten's quoted material does assume, like Gere, much about peer response theoretically, as well as peer response in practice. For example, they assume students are already able to perform in peer response exercises because they have a shared lexicon with other students that they already employ outside of the classroom. For example, students speak to one another and negotiate in their social circles already, thus, Reinking and Osten assume that students' social practices outside the classroom have prepared them for peer response inside the classroom. Their assumption is not wholly negative or "wrong;" students do have many skills that are transferable. Nonetheless, this representation of peer response encourages the teacher of writing to view their students as having established connections with their peers. Perhaps, in some cases, students do have this connection, but there is also the possibility and often indeed the likelihood that students do not have established connections. Reinking and Osten's instructional article does not give advice on helping students who feel alienated by the experience; instead, all we read are encouraging details about how students will be able to comment, will be able to give feedback, and will be able to receive feedback.

If we compare peer response in Reinking and Osten's text to Gere's never

unsuccessful peer response image, there are elements of Gere's image in their assumptions about peer response. Their argument echoes the first variable of Gere's image. Reinking and Osten frame peer response as "easier" in order to argue for the accessibility of the pedagogy for student writers. Their approach to peer response is to encourage student writers to respond in any way that they can, which is to say that Reinking and Osten don't believe that effective feedback is feedback that implements discipline specific discourse, rather, that comments in the student's own words are valuable in their own right. However, they stressed that students would need to explain why they commented the way that they did, so that there would be opportunities for revision. Yet what their approach to peer response assumes is that students will always be able to participate because they already know how to relate and negotiate with their peers.

To put this another way, Reinking and Osten perpetuate the first variable in Gere's supposed golden peer response group by maintaining the effortless of responding to a peer's writing. Their framing of peer response may seem disparate from the first variable, then again, Reinking and Osten could not assert the accessibility of peer response without also arguing the first variable. For instance, they are arguing within a peer response group, students need only to "respond honestly to a draft" and give advice as they would to a friend. The real world example Reinking and Osten provide reads as such: "Wouldn't you inform a friend who was wearing clothes that looked terrible why they looked terrible?" (70). Similar to Gere, Reinking and Osten are operating from the point of view where peers within a peer response group are on similar terms, perhaps even friendly

terms. If we investigate the logic used by Reinking and Osten closer, we notice their assumption is contingent upon Gere's assumption because without students having some common ground, one couldn't make the assertion that all members of the group should feel comfortable enough giving out feedback as they would clothing advice to a friend. As a result, the unsturdy assumption Gere's narrative perpetuates about peers being able to relate to peers absolutely is further expounded on by Reinking and Osten in their article, which results in two things: first, their article and many others maintain Gere's assumptions influencing the dominant narrative on peer response and second, articles like theirs further establish assumptions about peer response as "facts," which constricts how contemporary instructors approach and/or implement peer response in their classrooms. For when you have been told and re-told that peer response groups will be able to talk to each other easily and comfortably and implement peer response with this singular narrative in mind, you neglect the possibility that peer response groups could be sites of contention. Peer response groups are not always "safe" spaces for all students and it becomes problematic when instructors of writing implement peer response without consulting multiple narratives on the subject. By looking at how Gere's narrative has influenced the dominant narrative on peer response, we are able to see that our practices are directly affected by her assumptions. In fact, most scholarship on the subject seemingly adopts her assumptions without question. We will continue to trace similarities between Gere and contemporary scholarship, but it is important to note now that we can already see how Gere's telling of the history of peer response and the subsequent re-tellings of that history have consequences and those consequences can be found in our

classrooms.

The second of Gere's variables for her supposed successful peer response group, specifically, the variable that purports that a peer response group's success being contingent upon students having "investment" or personal stake in their writing, has also persisted and exists in contemporary scholarship on the subject. Like the first variable, the second variable is constructed by Gere, but cultivated into a doctrine contemporary scholars maintain, which is to say that when Gere assumed things about peer response, her perceived authority on peer response caused other scholars to assume the same. We will find that there are consequences for assuming every student has personal stake in their writing. If we assume students have investment we may not be able to see past our assumptions and notice students who are struggling with purpose or investment in their writing.

The next source we consult argued for "investment," in her essay "Teaching High-School Students to Write," which argued for investment or personal stake in writing decades before Gere did; nonetheless, Debora La Brant's article is included to demonstrate that though Gere's ideas are the primary foundation of the dominant narrative, there are still many more scholars that came before her who talked about peer response in much the same way. La Brant's assertion that the writing class is a space for students to "convey thought" genuinely may appear dated in the sequence of this section, but what may surprise any reader are the parallels between an article published decades ago and the current conversations about the same subject (La Brant 124). La Brant's article demonstrated how little the conversation has changed over time and how

convinced composition scholars are about what successful peer response looks like.

Inviting the reader to think in terms of binary, La Brant established what is and is not “good” writing for teaching writing. Writing should, La Brant writes, “have a basis of sincerity” (125). Students should be invested in the content of their work, as opposed to simply stringing coherent, correct sentences together. The educator is also to encourage their students to write “responsibly” or to write meaningfully about a topic in which their student is invested. La Brant suggested strongly that student drafts be read aloud and subsequently discussed (Gere 130). For this reason, La Brant ended up in Gere’s genealogy as one of the earlier scholars to note the increasing importance of “quality” over accuracy in writing. However, La Brant actually enters this project for a very different reason.

The significance of La Brant’s work lies in the usage of “investment,” that is, La Brant maintains students’ investment in their work will not only provoke them to write, but more importantly, students will want to “work at the problem,” as they have “stake” in it (La Brant 128). Although La Brant is writing in the late forties, “investment” becomes a foundational aspect in Gere’s perfect image of peer response. For example, if we turn to a contemporary scholar on the subject for a brief moment, we notice the similarities between the two conversations. Richard Straub’s “Responding—Really Responding—to Other Students’ Writing” suggested students should focus on several things in order to “really respond,” such as: “the assignment,” “the work of the class,” and “the stage of drafting” (Straub 164). But Straub also suggested students to consider “the writer’s interest and claims,” which is a statement that assumed student writers have

particular aims and stakes in their writing beyond completing the assignment at hand (164).

When a peer response group meets and we assume that each member of the group has both personal stake in their essay and had a specific purpose in writing their essay, there is a potentiality for the peer response group to be less than successful. This is not to say that students do not have investment in their writing or do they lack purpose; I do argue for instructors to take into consideration the possibility that every student may not enter a peer response group exercise with the same investment in their writing. It is for this reason and many others that peer response and the pervading Gere history that frames it is worth revisiting. Gere's assumptions are imbedded in her telling of the history of peer response. Current peer response scholars, by consulting her history, assume similarly that all student writers have personal investment in their writing assignments and as a result those students who do have not yet negotiated a purpose have no place in the supposed successful peer response group model. In fact, those students do not exist in Gere's assumptions or history. In other words, student writers who are resistant to the idea that they could have a purpose beyond completing the assignment for a passing grade, or student writers whose purposes are not fully understood by their peers, or student writers who have yet to negotiate a purpose for their writing are not imagined in Gere's model because she assumes that these students don't exist, that all students have investment in their writing. All of which is a problem that I seek to address, for if we continue to consult Gere's history singularly, we will continue to practice peer response in the same ways that we have for decades. Our practices, because of how influenced

they are by the history which frames them, are flawed and not working for all of our students, which is why we must begin to entertain multiple histories of peer response in an effort to reach all our students not just those who fit Gere's model.

Certainly, every variable is significant in Gere's supposed golden peer response group; nonetheless, Gere paid significant attention to autonomy in her text and I would argue that the third and final variable is held in higher regard than the rest. What I mean to suggest is that the writing groups Gere projected as the most successful writing groups were successful because they were made up of invested peers who operated under their own terms rather than the terms of an instructor. The dominant narrative that exists on peer response functions much like a manual: it instructs us on how to put the pieces together and tells us how it's meant to function. But the third variable appears in contemporary scholarship differently than the first two variables, as it returns again and again in articles whose purposes are mainly to enumerate how vital it is that we instructors try to exclude ourselves from the peer response group as much as possible for the sake of our students. Removing ourselves from the writing group is represented as crucial to the success of the group.

The third variable, as we will see in Jette G. Hansen and Jun Liu's article, "Guiding Principles for Effective Peer Response," is integrated into the argument by associating autonomy with success, but Hansen and Liu do more than suggest that autonomy within the writing group equals a successful peer response exercise. Instead, they argue that our main purpose as teachers of writing is to "make autonomous writers" (33). I do not disagree that we seek to empower our students and to develop their writing ability insofar

that they will rely less on our instruction and more on their developing understanding of writing conventions; nonetheless, there is something undeniably being said about what makes our peer response practices successful when one argues for complete autonomy in writing groups over semi-autonomous writing groups. Moreover, when Hansen and Liu support their argument with assertions that if we do not encourage autonomy in our peer response groups, then we are failing as teachers of writing they are establishing clear lines between autonomy, success, and our purpose as teachers. In short, Gere's initial fixation on autonomy and Hansen and Liu's subsequent focus on autonomy are directly connected to their belief that by being inside the writing group with our students, we instructors are inhibiting our students' development. To Gere, the writing group is a site where students will begin to learn how to be writers without the assistance of their instructor and Gere instills fear in her audience by associating too much instructor involvement with failure, specifically failing to meet the overall goals of writing instruction. Autonomy then is argued by Hansen and Liu as important because it "best" prepares our students for writing without their teachers; however, that assumption is not always true.

Another quote from Hansen and Liu is revealing; they push the argument for autonomy further. They write, "It" or teacher presence and/or comments "may minimize the importance of and the perceptions of the teacher's trust and confidence in peers' comments" (32). In the above quoted material, we are warned about the negative impact of instructor involvement. We are told that all the positive effects of peer response may never have the chance to occur if instructors enter the peer response group exercise.

Students may be rendered self-conscious and wary of their instructor and peers if instructors step in too much, which as an argument, is intended to further convince us complete autonomy is success and a goal to strive toward. Autonomy appears especially important to Hansen and Liu when it is tied to the very mission of teachers of writing. We saw this in Gere's text as well. The result is the same here in Hansen and Liu's text; specifically, teachers are advised to stay out of the writing group and encouraged to do so in order to better prepare their students for when they must write alone. For fear of failing, who are we to imagine a peer response group with major teacher involvement when it would violate our mission is what Hansen and Liu argue; however, I argue that the consequences of equating autonomy to success should be included in the scope of our shared goals as compositionists. As instructors of writing, we are not the only authoritative presence inside of classrooms. There are students who will immediately assume roles of power as soon as we abdicate our position of power. Who is to say that within a peer response group, even with little to no instructor involvement, all students would feel freedom to express their opinions when there are always power differentials at play in any environment? There is always the possibility that certain students within peer response groups could assume authoritative roles and abuse their adopted power. This is yet another example of how deeply Gere's narrative has impacted the dominant narrative on peer response. We should note that the above example is a direct consequences of the assumptions we've made about peer response.

We should keep in mind that peer response, as we have been using the term throughout the length of this project, refers to the practice of students exchanging

feedback on their drafts to develop their writing ability (Nelson 77). Equally important to note, peer response exercises in contemporary composition classrooms are directly connected to process oriented writing practices, which encourage writers to write multiple drafts and place great emphasis on the value of revision. Therefore, peer response interactions and the feedback produced from them are, undoubtedly, important. But this is all review, however what is important to recognize and repeat here is the fundamentality of these basic components of peer response. As we saw, these fundamentals are expounded upon and conflated by Gere, whose history has been perpetuated. Peer response, on a rudimentary level, strictly needs multiple students to provide each other feedback; however, in classic and contemporary scholarship on the subject, peer response needs much more than willing students to “work.”

Peer response in the context of the dominant narrative can encourage a “sense of cohesion” (Hansen and Lui 31), develop “important interpersonal skills” (Paton 291), and “helps authors see writing through another’s eyes” (Miller 308). The list can go on. Peer response develops, empowers, relieves, helps: it is “capable of responding to their ever-changing rhetorical goals” and lastly, peer response can work to bridge gaps among students and can build community (Cahill 307). There is no place among the dominant narrative for drawbacks or re-imaginings of the pedagogy. What exists presently are the same arguments and theoretical talk that Gere employed in her text *Writing Groups*.

Terms such as *success* and *unsuccessful* are uncomfortable and rigid, yet Gere’s original genealogy and the subsequent dominant narrative on peer response operates within these terms. Gere clearly has established in her history what successful and

unsuccessful peer response looks like. I've stated before that it is difficult to exist outside or away from Gere's narrative when writing on this topic. This is due to the fact that we are all complicit in maintaining and perpetuating the assumptions from Gere's history. When her assumptions are treated as facts or when we give her text the authority on the subject we are, in multiple ways, keeping those assumptions alive. Although we are operating within this narrative, it may not be apparent to us that we are. But this is the part we play in forming the dominant narrative on peer response. We contribute in different ways and do not reproduce the narrative exactly. Instead, we reproduce different manifestations of the same assumptions because we have, over time, naturalized those assumptions into the conversation of this topic. What Gere assumed is now interpreted as fact.

The narratives we have explored, in depth, have directly affected my practices. I too held the image of an autonomous group of students, talking easily among themselves about higher level writing concerns. That equalled success in my mind and anything less than that was a failed implementation of peer response. I framed peer response with Gere's assumptions and thought of this pedagogy only in the terms of Gere thus, I ignored many possibilities. I willfully ignored how students might have difficulty negotiating in the groups and I forgot about the possibility of conflict because of imbalances of power within the groups.

In the next section of this project, we will return to the question that prompted me to revisit a pedagogy on which I had a resolved opinion. The same question Ching asked that prompted me to consider the consequences the histories of our pedagogies. Briefly,

we mainly talk about peer response in terms of its successes and its benefits, but we do not entertain the adverse effects. I want to make clear that I am not arguing against the efficacy of this pedagogy. Rather, I want to encourage other compositionists to consider other histories and other accounts, specifically our students. I ask us to entertain our failures and successes in the same breath, at the same time so that we may serve all of our students, not simply the ones that fit the paradigm set by Gere.

#### Section 4

Gere's telling of the history of peer response has shaped current peer response practices as we saw in the last section, new teachers of writing are invited to implement peer response in their classrooms in very specific ways. Although I will continue to highlight the assumptions from Gere's theories that have since become naturalized as fact among current peer response scholars, I cannot stress enough the strength of the ties that bind current perceptions on peer response pedagogy to Gere's theories.

Peer response is, as we still maintain, a pedagogy that encourages students to think and respond critically to their peers' written works; furthermore, peer response develops student writing practices so that students may work more independently from the instructor. Often peer response pedagogy has been put into conversation with topics such as citizenship, which is a juxtaposition that asserts the significance and success of peer response pedagogy as it aids student writing and helps them to become better communicators in the world: better citizens of the world.

If you, like me, found yourself nodding along in agreement with the above statement, know that many share the same sentiment. This is the singular way that we imagine peer response, and scholars have written from this point of view for decades, and as a result, we have carefully groomed the dominant way of thinking about peer response. In other words, we are thinking singularly about peer response and by limiting ourselves to this dominant narrative without consulting other narrative analogously, we fail to recognize the shortcomings of this "one-size-fits-all" pedagogy. Ching writes, "History, or 'what we know about the past,' does not just reflect its own time, but also shapes how

we are likely to think about things in the future,” and so I encourage us to take the past theories and assumptions on peer response seriously and recognize their existence in the present, as well as recognize the effect that these theories and assumptions have on our practices because there are real, felt consequences of this pedagogy for our students which we have ignored (Ching 304).

Published in the field of education, Margaret E. Weaver’s 1995 article “Using Peer Response in the Classroom: Students’ Perspectives” is not always included in the compositionist’s conversation on peer response; however, I suggest that this article’s marginality can be better attributed to the article’s focus on students’ perspective on pedagogy. Articles like Weaver’s that include student voices are difficult to come by, but Weaver’s article, along with others, are revealing of the actual concerns students have toward peer response groups. There is often the misconception that peer response groups are positive spaces, but Weaver’s article evidences the “more threatening” and “competitive” aspects of peer response groups (qtd. in Weaver 36). And while there may be dozens of adverse effects from implementing peer response, we will be focusing on student experiences that detail the competitive and threatening nature of peer response groups. We do so in order to dispel one of the biggest myths about peer response, or the “safe space” myth, that presents peer response groups as “comfortable,” “safe” spaces that students are able to speak freely in. But there is also a secondary purpose for looking at these students’ experience: that is we seek to present an alternative narrative for our consideration. There is a hole in our understanding of what success means in terms of peer response because we have neglected the voices of our students and excluded their

“failure,” or negative experiences, from the dominant narrative on peer response. An alternative narrative, which includes students experiencing success and failure in peer response groups, can begin to fill that hole in our understanding. I’ve challenged us to entertain multiple narratives so that we can begin to broaden our understanding of “success” and “failure” in peer response, but I do so to directly affect our current practices.

### **“What Students Think”**

Many instructors of writing assume that the writing group is a “safe-space,” which is a term that seeks to encapsulate an environment where individuals would feel free to “take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors” (Holley and Steiner 50). This assumption is supported in many ways, ways that we had explored in the last section, yet I argue that there is a greater chance that the writing group is a more hostile space than we would like to admit, for if we turn to student perspectives, we notice that their dislike for the pedagogy is not without reason. Instead their experiences with this approach are revealing of the problematic nature of peer response groups.

Margaret Weaver’s study highlighted student perspectives that showed how students did not feel comfortable in their peer response groups. Weaver found that students felt as if they were competing with their peers within a peer response group. Weaver’s students were wary of the pedagogy from the start; they had little confidence in their peers and were certain that their peers’ feedback was “dishonest.” A student in Weaver’s study admitted, “there was a lack of honesty on my part while editing my

buddy's paper. I didn't want to admit that his paper was better than mine.'" Weaver concluded that this type of spirit is what likely added to the competitiveness of the writing group that other students felt (35).

Other scholars have come to a similar conclusion. Virginia Draper's article "Writing Response Groups: From Power Trips to Empowerment" noted how "in the teacher's absence, some students assume power over others...some students intimidate others on the basis of presumed gender, racial, or educational superiority" (3). In Draper's observation of her own students, she noticed how certain students would preempt conversations regarding specific aspects of their drafts and overtake the writing group by asking leading questions. In a group of three, one student Maria read a page of her essay and immediately asked her peers about the strength of her thesis, which because of the brevity of Maria's reading, they had yet to hear. In this example, Maria controls the conversation and constrains the freedom of the other group members. In both student experiences, students are not modeling "successful" peer response practices. We believe students to be capable of coming together to give honest feedback to the best of their ability, but this common assumption ignores power differentials that are often established within classrooms. It is evident from these students' experiences that peer response groups are not always democratic spaces; instead, these small groups are subject to competitiveness or inequality.

Another study conducted by S. Freedman surveyed 715 students about their experience with peer response. They admitted to having a less than positive experience due to students viewing their peers' responses as untrustworthy, compared to their

instructor's feedback, and due to students viewing the process as unhelpful to their paper (85). Coupled with this, students who were classified as "low-achieving" students did not "like" peer response as much as "higher-achievers" did (94). Weaver, Draper, and Freedman may have had very different students and class environments, but all came to similar conclusions about peer response; specifically, they found issues within the dynamic of the writing group. With this in mind, their studies negate the commonly held idea among compositionists that peer response is a "one-size-fits-all-pedagogy." The specific experiences Freedman observed evidence the inequity felt by students when they are asked to participate in peer response. The inequity that students felt is complex and we should focus on the element of distrust that Freedman concluded was evident in the students' experiences. Distrust in the classroom was linked to credibility, which is why an instructor's feedback was valued more than a peer's feedback. Presumably students wanted to have the "right" or "best" feedback. It is not surprising then that students who had been categorized as "low-achieving" would dislike peer response more so than students who had been categorized as "high-achieving" on account of their feedback, which could be perceived as the least "right" because of the students' status as low performing. The presence of distrust in peer response groups has been ignored and simplified, but I argue that distrust is borne from students' established schemas toward their peers. To say this is to draw our attention to how important a role our students play in peer response. No group is the same, thus, we have to consult our students' experiences, whether they be success stories or stories of failures, to develop our understanding of how the pedagogy is actually working today.

Several studies present an image of an entirely different atmosphere than we might typically ascribe to writing groups. In Weaver, Draper, and Freedman's studies, students are not working together harmoniously. Instead, they appear to be distrustful of one another, so much so that they will give disingenuous feedback merely to play the part of the peer responder. While dishonesty is not conducive to the peer response and is a major concern, what is more serious are the students' reasons for distrusting their peers. These competitive motivations are one among many realities of peer response that disrupt the idea that writing groups are always "safe" spaces, for if the students see their peers as competition, they are less likely to try to help them. For instance, students who do not see their peers' feedback as helpful will likely not value the exchange of feedback. Part of students' disapproval toward the exchange can be attributed to students feeling torn from their own papers to comment on their peer. Ultimately, exchanging feedback is seen by students as taking away from their writing development and writing process and, as a result, students wanting to exchange feedback quickly in order to move on might—as in Weaver's study—give placating feedback. But even more dangerous are the students who enter the writing group with no intention of giving constructive feedback.

In Draper's study, there is a student (Maria) who behaved differently in her writing group than the amiable students in Weaver's study. Unlike Weaver's student who gave meaningless advice, Maria had confidence in her writing and showed little regard for her peers. Looking at her comments, one can see her disregard for her peers when she took control of the entire peer response group. By assuming a role of power inside the peer group, Maria constrained her peers' discussions and trivialized her peers' questions. For

example, Maria would re-direct conversations in the writing group and would refuse to answer the questions that her peers prompted her with. By refusing to answer questions and then asking her own questions, Maria maintained control over the group and guided their conversations in directions in which she approved. In this situation, Maria's behavior did not appear to affect the other members of the writing group adversely; however, another conclusion Freedman came to do speaks to the problematic nature of certain students taking roles of power in writing groups. Her conclusion stated that lower achieving students did not value peer response as much as higher achieving students did. In the earlier example, Maria took center stage and orchestrated her group members much to their advantage it seemed. But if we altered this scenario and imagined Maria as the higher achieving student and her fellow group members as lower achieving students, her management of her group could affect her group members adversely. Maria found a venue to showcase her ability, but at the cost of her other group members who are silenced by her command of the group. Students who are classified as lower achieving may feel less confident in a group like Maria's and less inclined to give honest feedback, as they may interpret their feedback as inferior.

Confidence is but one area of concern in the writing group. When power differentials are established inside of a peer response group there are many more areas of concern. For example, Draper noted in her study that some students who assume power may "intimidate others on the basis of presumed gender, racial, or educational superiority." Whether students are knowingly or unknowingly taking control in writing groups due to presumed superiority is less the concern here. Rather, I mean to draw

attention to the reality that inside this “one-size-fits-all-pedagogy,” there are students operating from presumed superiorities, which in turn render the writing group unsafe.

In a recent study, African American female students were interviewed about their experiences with collaborative learning processes, including but not limited to peer response, in order to address the gap in collaborative response literature, which does not include the voices of female students of color. Many of the students admitted their low regard for peer response, although the students who were interviewed appreciated peer response and peer collaboration when there was an element of “fairness” to the group (Du, Zhou, Xu, and Lei 954). Primarily, the students interviewed indicated that a fair group would be one where there is an equal balance of “give and take:” every group member would do their share and participate equally and thoughtfully. However, as we explored in Draper’s study, there are instances where students in a writing group are not all working with fairness in mind.

In the Maria example, her behavior is reminiscent of the act of giving (she gave feedback), but she certainly does not open herself up to receiving any response from her peers. Maria’s adoption of the authoritative role could have been motivated by a number of presumed superiorities; although, the result of her actions is the subsequent disenfranchisement of her fellow group members. What Du et al. concluded was the importance of classroom equity and its influence on “students’ cognitive and affective development” (954). As we can imagine, when a peer response group is not operating with fairness in mind, students suffer. What the experiences of these students of color highlight are the ways in which roles of power in collaborative learning interplay with

race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Du et al. noted that students of color face “barriers and stereotypes” within the academy, and though Du et al. neglected to note how pervasive racial and sexist aggressions are inside and outside of the academy, they do make a salient point when they conclude: students of color are “exposed [to] more questioning and doubts of their knowledge, capability and credibility” (954). With this in mind, the Maria example becomes more complex and perhaps more problematic, as her example evidences how students assuming roles of power in the peer response groups could be doing so because of their assumed superiority over their peers.

### **Teaching Writing in a Vacuum**

Like Weaver, Draper, and Freedman’s studies, I also encountered a “Maria” in my own freshman composition course who struggled to read her partner’s paper in a peer response exercise. “Maria’s” main feedback to her partner was to omit the prose written in Spanish from the essay. “Maria’s” reason for suggesting this revision was related to “flow,” which is a nebulous term used by many students that can substitute for terms like “readability.” My class’s “Maria” did not speak Spanish and could not read the essay written in both Spanish and English without feeling excluded as a reader. The group member who received this feedback ultimately did not change her paper and the final copy that was turned into me was written in both Spanish and English; however, the author of this essay did come to me after receiving her peers’ feedback. Whatever occurred in the peer response session is beyond my knowledge, but I do know that my student felt the need to come and ask me if it was “ok” to include Spanish in her essay. What’s worth highlighting are the details of the exchange that took place between the

members of this specific writing group. If we look closer at the two students, what one may notice are the roles they appear in in this example. “Maria” was one of my most confident, outspoken students and the student who had written the essay in Spanish and English lacked confidence in her writing. “Maria” may not have been aware of her privilege or how she was manipulating the writing group by way of her assumed superiority over her partner, but “Maria’s” sense of entitlement gave her the confidence to directly critique her peer. But “Maria’s” comments did more than critique her partner’s writing, instead “Maria’s” suggestions were imbedded with a belief system that did not recognize Spanish as belonging in academic papers. Therefore, comments like “Maria’s” are significant and worth analyzing for they reveal how peer response groups are not always “safe” spaces. Moreover, peer response groups are made up of individuals who have different beliefs and some of these beliefs are what motivate certain students to assume roles of power and subjugate others.

What may seem like only an anecdote from my past teaching experience is another example of the real, felt consequences of peer response as implemented as a “one-size-fits-all pedagogy.” My student asked me one day in class if she could write in Spanish because of the interaction she had with another student who had assumed a role of power in the writing group. My student doubted her writing choices and was made to feel like she had made poor writing choices.

To further analyze this example and the others before it, we will use Trinh T. Minh-ha and her theories on “specialness” in order to further enumerate the impact of the interactions that take place in a peer response group. But before we apply this theory to

my own anecdotal experience and the studies mentioned earlier, I first should explain the theory in brief.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's theory on the "sense of specialness" can be found in full in her text, *Woman, Native, Other*, and though I am only applying this particular theory from her book to the previous examples, Minh-ha's text does challenge many conventions of writing that we hold today. What Minh-ha calls the "sense of specialness" encapsulates the absurdity of being visible for one's difference, but not being able to act outside of one's perceived difference. In other words, Minh-ha is drawing attention to the way in which those looking through the white imaginary perceive difference, that is, members viewing the world through this lens construct their version of "the *unspoiled* African, Asian, or Native American..." and seek nothing other than their imagined difference. When those operating from the white imaginary run into difference outside what they have constructed, that difference is too special--too different--thus it cannot exist. Rather that "outside the line" difference is considered "dangerous" (Minh-ha 140). Minh-ha's theory aids my analysis because it problematizes the examples we have explored. I don't intend for my usage of "problematize" to carry a negative connotation; rather, by applying the "sense of specialness" theory to studies on peer response do we begin to draw attention to the problems in peer response that we typically ignore. Therefore, by problematizing, the silences in the literature on peer response will be made more visible.

Peer response literature does not typically focus on racial, gender, sexuality, class, or ability concerns. In the cases where peer response literature does discuss these topics

singularly—not intersectionally—they do so in the rhetoric Minh-ha discussed in her theory of “specialness.” Which is to say, difference in peer response pedagogy appears in a constrained form. Thus, I use Minh-ha to debunk how peer response literature constructs difference and to read for what is not there: student voices who were too “different” to not appear in the literature.

Returning to the previous examples with this in mind, Weaver’s study and the peer interaction between the two students who felt the need to be dishonest with one another becomes more complex. If we read for silences that may be present in this example, we would first question why the student who said: ““there was a lack of honesty on my part while editing my buddy’s paper. I didn’t want to admit that his paper was better than mine”” (Weaver 35) felt compelled to be dishonest. While part of the answer to this question lies in the competitive environment of the writing group the other lies in the student’s dishonesty. Their dishonesty can also be tied to schema that privilege certain types of writing over others. The student lacks confidence in this situation and has deemed their peer’s writing “better.” Perhaps, their own writing is at the same level as the other student but does not appear on the paper as their peer’s writing did.

Take the anecdotal experience from my classroom for example. The student who was less confident in their writing choices only felt as such because her essay appeared different to her peer responders. “Maria” had likely seen Spanish in texts before, but had at the time access to a translation in some way, perhaps in the form of a English translation in a parenthesis or a footnote. However, Minh-ha helps us to understand why “Maria” reacted adversely to the inclusion of Spanish text without any English

translations. The student could not imagine writing that “didn’t make sense” or “had no meaning” to her. In that student’s mind, the other writer had ostensibly failed in her purpose because she didn’t write in a way that her responder could understand. However, in this example, the student responder couldn’t imagine “good” writing on the same plane as Spanish text because the Spanish text had no meaning that she could understand; therefore, the student who implemented the Spanish text in their essay is left feeling as if they have stepped out of line or that they have done something wrong.

In both examples, students are not recognized as “good” writers in the classroom because of their perceived difference, as it is not within the confines of the privileged party. The abjection they feel is real and affects their academic performance. In my classroom, I saw many students question their choices and feel as if their voice in particular did not “fit” in the academy. I can imagine innumerable articles filled with experiences of students who felt as if they didn’t fit in a peer response group or who couldn’t voice their opinion in a peer response group because of members in peer groups who infringe upon those freedoms. There is a dearth of articles that showcase these narratives, which is why we must explore them now and continue to do so. We found in our exploration of student experiences that abjection is one of the real, felt consequences of implementing peer response as a “one-size-fits-all” pedagogy. We also directly challenged the “safe” spaces assumption that has been proliferated. In short, students, typically students who assume roles of power within the peer response group, have the ability to render the writing group unsafe.

### **The Consequences of “Success”**

As Gere constructed it, successful peer response can only occur if several conditions are met, but the “success” of the group primarily relies on the group being an autonomous group managed by students who all feel equally comfortable sharing thoughtful responses with one another. I do not imagine that many instructors of writing attempt to implement the exact “golden” peer response group Gere imagined in their classrooms today; however, what made writing groups successful in her mind has certainly influenced how we implement peer response today. Therefore, we are not practicing peer response exactly like Gere, but our practices have deep ties to the theories and advice given by Gere.

This project means to shed light on some of the consequences of those theories and advice that prevailed in peer response pedagogy, specifically, as we have in this section, highlighting the often hostile, threatening, and competitive nature of peer response groups. I have included such narratives in order to encourage fellow teachers of writing as well as scholars of peer response pedagogy to entertain more than the dominant narrative from which we currently operate. By considering more than one narrative, further, by entertaining multiple narrative at once, can we begin the process of re-imagining this pedagogy for our students.

The next section will include additional narratives on peer response, some of which model alternative models of successful peer response. As well, the next section includes models of peer response that take place outside of the composition course, specifically, peer response in the writing center.

## Section 5

Considering the complexity of the timelines we have explored, I find it difficult to come to one neat, orderly conclusion; nonetheless, by reading Gere's timeline and Ching's alternative timeline analogously, we have succeeded in entertaining more than one singular narrative on peer response, which in turn has broadened our understanding of peer response as a pedagogical practice. As well, by analyzing these seemingly contradictory histories alongside each other and highlighting the ideology embedded in the two narratives, we discovered ideologically how closely related Gere and Ching's texts were to the motivations and agendas of the theories they employed. As a result, we were able to determine that there is a correlation between how a history of a pedagogy is framed and how a pedagogy is practiced. Ching inspired this investigation when she wrote, "once told, they [narrative histories] enable or constrain future practices," but we further complicated the notion of how narrative histories are told when we considered one of the major consequences of the way in which peer response is typically practiced.

The fourth section, which focused on student accounts of threatening, competitive peer response groups, explored one of the major consequences of the way we implement peer response currently. The examples I gave barely scratch the surface of the issue of peer response groups disenfranchising students, specifically students who are perceived as "different." I can imagine several more consequences that stem from the traditional practices I've implemented in my own classroom. I will argue that no matter the nature of the consequence, the way to address our students' needs can be achieved through intersectional thinking. In this project, scholars from a variety of disciplines allowed me

to re-visit peer response. Coupled with those scholars' unique perspectives, opening up my research to include the accounts of students also complicated my lens. For these reasons, I encourage us to begin dismantling "success" in relation to peer response as we have known it, to better address our students' needs and to teach writing more holistically.

In a way, "successful" peer response is modeled to teachers of writing as a pedagogical practice in which we are not to be involved. Paton wrote extensively on the significance of preparation a teacher of writing must do in order for the peer response groups to be successful. Teachers are to: "talk about peer review," "model the process," and "provide a small number of specific questions;" however, teachers of writing are also encouraged to "leave the room for a short time," so students may develop a sense of ownership over the time they have with their peers (Paton 299-300). Other scholars like Cahill argued for more student involvement, which was also an argument for less teacher involvement. Cahill encouraged students in her classroom to develop their own worksheets and pointed questions for their peer response sessions (Cahill 306). Miller, like Paton, argued for preparation over significant teacher involvement during the peer response session. She stressed modeling the process of responding to work and encouraged teachers of writing to do this modeling in order to make the students feel more "comfortable" with the process of responding (Miller 310). Each of these scholars do not exactly replicate Gere's narrative; as well, these scholars deviate from her conversation in numerous ways. Paton deviated from Gere with her suggestion to teachers to join peer response groups in order to re-focus students on the task of

responding. With that being said, “success” is still grounded in Gere’s terms. For example, composition scholarship focuses on preparation for two practical reasons, reasons I agree with, but also take issue with. The first reason is simple: planning, modeling, and practicing does assist and prepare students for their future peer response sessions. The second reason is more complex, as Paton, Cahill, and Miller detail, through preparation we teachers are able to construct the way we want our students to respond without engaging in their peer response groups. “Success” in Gere’s terms is connected to autonomy and empowerment, and once we look at Paton, Cahill, and Miller, their response groups are successful because of their focus on the preparation. By focusing on planning, modeling, and practicing, the teacher of writing doesn’t take over the actual peer response session, and for this reason students will feel they have the tools to respond without the teacher. “Success” now is not an exact iteration of Gere. Especially when we consider how contemporary strategies of modeling, which encourage teachers of writing to take more control over how we model responding to our students, goes against what Gere would have suggested. Gere would never have argued for modeling in this way; however, “success” boils down to the same principals. Specifically, students need to have some autonomy and control/ownership over their peer response groups in order for the group to be considered successful. Thus, we teachers must leave them alone.

As one may imagine, there are very few peer response groups that would exactly parallel the ideal model, yet we continue to strive for an imperfect ideal regardless of the real, felt effects on students. This is not a negative reflection on composition as a field, so

much as it is me reflecting on a reoccurring phenomenon that is happening inside and outside the academy. But it is not enough to say that peer response, as it is practiced now, has the potentiality to be problematic. My intention is not to denigrate composition or our practices, but I want to address the hole in the broader narrative on peer response that ignores how students struggle with the practice.

I cannot conjure a solution or a quick fix for peer response practices. It took great pains to revisit a pedagogical practice that I had a fixed opinion on; nonetheless, by revisiting peer response, I am able to begin thinking in new directions about the pedagogy. “Success” is an arbitrary term, but I encourage compositionists to continue dismantling “success” and to reimagine it in multiple terms. We should consult our students, our colleagues within our discipline and outside our discipline, and also consult our “failures,” as there is much more we can learn about peer response and how it affects students. This pedagogy isn’t finished.

As for success, it can exist in composition classrooms, but only if we allow multiple narratives to define it. For example, if I were to reflect on how I approached this project, I should have included the voices of my students and my colleagues along with the research I included. Each of these narratives would have given another perspective on peer response that I, from my positionality, do not have access to.

But when we continue dismantling “success,” we should be cautious to the possibility that a reimagined definition of success could become the “success” of the past: a venerable object placed on the highest shelf in our minds. Thus, we have the interminable task of constantly re-defining success in terms of peer response.

In an effort to model the process of defining success in multiple terms, I will highlight two alternative models of peer response that can be seen as successful once we step away from the dominant narrative's definition of "success."

### **Facilitated Peer Response Exercises**

Once we begin to dismantle "success" as we understand the term now, successful peer response practices and their dependency on autonomy decreases significantly. Ching imagines successful peer response in the terms of "instructor led conferences," which from the dominant perspective, would not have been a successful approach because of the inclusion of instructor feedback into the writing group (Ching 316). In Ching's terms, writing conferences that include instructors would "revive the possibility that students and teachers can collaborate on a set of common goals." These terms would encourage students and teachers to work in conjunction with one another on a smaller scale—the writing group—and would give both students and teachers an opportunity to "enter into the dialogic exchange through which learning happens" (314). Ching intended to highlight the difference between student and teacher feedback, but at the same time she intended to celebrate the differences in discourses among all members of any peer response group, not just between students and teachers. In other words, Ching's terms dismantle the binary of student and teacher by suggesting that in a peer response group, students will also encounter different discourses even among their peers, which coupled with their teacher's feedback will allow them to develop their writing (316).

Unique to Ching's model for successful peer response would be her ideas about "common goals" and their ability to build a deeper connection among students and

teachers. While Gere's history sought to "disempower teachers," Ching suggests that teacher authority can be understood differently when students and teachers are working together, contributing equally toward a common goal such as developing a paper.

However, what may be evident in my own analysis of Ching's model and her description of her own terms are the pieces of Gere that seem to persist always in our talk about peer response.

To define success in multiple terms does not mean to deny certain narratives and toss them away. Gere is still useful, just as other narratives that fall in the same vein as Gere are useful; nonetheless, those narratives must be read analogously with other narratives if we are trying to consult multiple viewpoints without privileging or discrediting one or the other. In the same way, when we define success in multiple terms we should consult Ching's model alongside Gere's. Multiple models, multiple ways of defining success keep compositionists negotiating what success is. Just as the students in our classroom change, our pedagogies should change.

### **Peer Interactions in Writing Tutoring Sessions**

Another way of re-defining successful peer response can be found outside of the classroom in peer tutoring interactions. Christina Van Dyke defines successful peer interactions in tutoring sessions as an "individualized method of teaching" where students and their tutors are "sitting side-by-side engaged in a stimulating dialogue" (1-10).

Success in these terms lies in the individual attention that students and tutors have the opportunity to receive during the tutoring session. Students are able to have the tutor's undivided attention, but tutors also are given the exact same attention from their tutee.

Moreover, peer tutoring interactions in Van Dyke's terms are successful when tutors "do not play the role of the shaman, guru, or mentor, but instead are the architects and partners" of the tutee (3).

Unique to Van Dyke's terms of success is the emphasis on partnership in the peer tutoring interaction, which is an idea that works to combat the common misconception that tutors are mystical experts of writing. Much like in Ching's terms, Gere's perspective would question Van Dyke's terms for success due to the power differentials in the tutoring session that privilege the tutor. In other words, the common misconception that grants tutors superiority and authority would alter the dynamic of the tutoring session; however, Van Dyke's terms for success seek to disempower those narratives that disenfranchise tutees in tutoring sessions. That is, by defining successful tutoring practices in the terms of "partnership," Van Dyke emphasizes the importance of collaboration and equal contribution, but her envisioning of equal contribution doesn't mean that both tutor and tutee are contributing in the same way; rather, she suggests, both are "promoting more effective methods" in different ways. Van Dyke celebrates the different roles that the tutor and tutee appear in during a tutoring session, but at the same time she doesn't ignore the narratives that place tutors in positions of power. Instead, she emphasizes them. Tutors will have power in the session, power that enables the tutor to ask questions, to point out points of confusion, or to make suggestions. But the tutee will have power too, power that enables the tutee to ask questions, make suggestions, or to disregard the tutor's comments. The tutor code of ethics reads, "I understand my relationship to each student I tutor is professional and not personal...I will share

techniques for improving study skills with students; respecting their differing learning styles and preferences while exhibiting excellence in my approach to the content being tutored” (“The National Tutor”). Tutors are trained to see the tutee differently and encouraged to share the knowledge they have with the tutee, but important to effective tutoring is the acknowledgment of how beneficial the experience is to both the tutor and the tutee. Tutors and tutees negotiate and develop together through their interactions, despite being in seemingly disparate positions. Van Dyke attributes the success of tutoring sessions to these established roles of power. She celebrates authoritative roles of power, as long as the tutee acknowledges the equal power that the tutee has in the session.

### **Re-Negotiating Peer Response: A Process**

Both alternative models of peer response have elements of Gere within them, but there are just as many deviations as there are similarities. Once we put these narratives alongside many others, we can begin to define success in multiple terms. Peer response can be much more than what it is now and we can begin to address the consequences of our attention to a singular narrative when we entertain multiple narratives.

I want an answer, but like writing, re-negotiating a largely unchallenged pedagogy is a process. We won't be able to enact change all at once; nonetheless, this project is one way to begin grappling with peer response and other pedagogies like it.

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