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Lochran C. Fallon
Pennsylvania State University, lochranfallon@gmail.com

Anne Elrod Whitney
Pennsylvania State University, awhitney@psu.edu

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Cover Page Footnote
We are indebted to the teachers who have both shared their experiences with us in interviews and shared their lives with us in a writing group.

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"It's a Two-Way Street:" Giving Feedback in a Teacher Writing Group

Lochran C. Fallon
Pennsylvania State University

Anne Elrod Whitney
Pennsylvania State University

Teacher-Writer Writing Groups

Teacher-writer writing groups are a type of professional community growing in popularity. First, there have been teacher-writers for as long as there have been teachers, as teachers have always written to conduct their work and/or to communicate with colleagues near and far about their work; however, the idea of the "teacher-writer" has also developed over time into a distinct professional identity with accompanying professional activities (Whitney, Fredricksen, Hicks, Yagelski, & Zuidema, 2014). These teacher-writers sometimes form groups, either on their own or under the auspices of a National Writing Project site, university affiliation, or school/district. The writing groups meet virtually or in-person to share drafts and support one another in their writing goals (Hicks, Whitney, Zuidema, & Fredricksen, in progress; Smith & Wrigley, 2016). A teacher-writer writing group can offer a "breathing space" for teachers to be and become themselves in ways that their professional environments do not (Dawson et al., 2013). While teachers' writing, including work in writing groups, has been known to benefit their students (Fassinger et al., 1992; Whyte, 2011), we focused here on benefits to teachers themselves. For example, Dawson's group formed as "a writing group for teachers—not a space focused on instruction or lesson plans, but a space where we can write for our own purposes and audiences and give each other feedback" (Dawson et al., 2013, p. 94). This "breathing space" allows for "discussion" and "talk," and provide teacher-writers with a place where they may be able to "expand [their] notions of writing and [their] ways of being writers…writ[ing] to make sense, heal, escape, laugh, and play" (p. 97).

Teacher writing groups, while sometimes having official facilitators, tend to distribute authority horizontally. Hierarchical issues are reduced, because "No one person leads the group meetings" (Dawson et al., 2013, p. 97), allowing the members to spread their authority out among the group. This communal distribution of authority may help to mitigate the "dandelion feeling" that Whitney et al (2012) described as a fear common to teacher-writers: "just as the tallest flower to spring up in the lawn is the one to get its head chopped off, teachers spoke about feeling reluctant to raise themselves up above their colleagues or to presume to tell another teacher how to teach" (p. 52). Given the importance of authority to writing, including but not limited to teachers' professional writing (Whitney et al., 2012; Whitney, Zuidema, & Fredricksen, 2014), this is a significant benefit that writing groups can offer to teacher-writers.

Developing a comfort with not just sharing, but critiquing the work of others is yet another benefit of teacher-writer writing groups. For example, Flythe (1989) illuminated the process of development that teacher-writers experienced in a group in which she was a member:

> As a rule, they hesitate to criticize another person's writing, so they tread very gently, as at first they should. As we continue, we become more comfortable and honest about our reactions. Group members begin to respect each other's opinions. We learn that each member is like an editor, and like editors, we may each like different things. We discover that it is okay to disagree with the group. It is the writer's work, and the writer makes the final decision. (p. 63)

This study shifted the focus on feedback from the recipient to the provider of feedback, and the effects that *providing* feedback could have on one's *own* work. Through analysis of responses gathered by interviews with several teacher-writers working together in a writing group, we will argue that providing feedback takes place within a contextual relationship of reciprocity that transforms the writing of *all* participants involved.

Previous Research on Feedback in Writing Groups

Receiving Feedback in a Classroom or Writing Group

Numerous effects produced by *receiving* feedback in classroom and writing group settings have already been documented. For example, Rollinson (2005) suggests that "it may be that becoming a critical reader of others' writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing" (p. 24). Supiano et al. (1989) suggest that a "sense of community" is formed from

receiving feedback (p. 89). Receiving feedback has also been connected to developing capability and authority:

> We also learnt skills to allow us to perform effective critical reviews of our own and others' writing. We learnt much about the structure of academic writing and developed a shared metalanguage. As our skills and confidence grew, we came to view ourselves as more authoritative. (Maher et al., 2008, p. 274).

Developing authority and capability applies as much to giving and receiving feedback as it does to writing. Fassinger et al. (1992) discovered that writers may seek different audiences for feedback based on a reviewer's capability and authority for providing the feedback they seek: "Although they valued their peers' feedback, students may have not done extensive revision because they lacked full confidence in their peers and believed only the teacher could provide an evaluation" (p. 54). Whitney et al. (2012) provided insight into the role authority plays in writing for an audience (who may, in turn, be providing feedback to the writer): "Becoming 'expert enough' to share one's ideas in an article is not simply a matter of being a good enough teacher or a good enough writer but also a matter of claiming authority within that community" (p. 5).

Writing groups can also serve as a safe-harbor where a writer can develop the acceptance and comfort level with feedback needed to fully participate as a provider of feedback and a receiver of its benefits. As one teacher-writer notes: "I was a bit nervous about sharing my work with students, but supportive critiques from our writing group have made me aware of strengths and tolerant of flaws. I did not need the students to validate my work; nor did I fear they would find previously undiscovered major errors" (Fassinger et al., 1992, p. 55). Assisting different people to become capable of providing and receiving feedback also promotes a diversity of responses, as members providing feedback in a writing group are very likely to come from a wide range of perspectives, "Most of us are undereducated about ways to respond to our students' writing when we begin to teach…. Not only does the writing group respond in ways that hadn't occurred to me but the members often respond in ways that would never occur to me" (Williams, 1990, p. 59).

Research has also addressed how writers in classrooms and writing groups actually improve their writing in response to feedback given, whether by a teacher or a peer. For example, studies devoted to the impact of teacher and peer revisions on the writing of ESL and L2 learners (e.g., Paulus, 1999; Myles, 2002; Tuzi, 2004; Berg, 1999; Guardado & Shi, 2007) affirmed that feedback between L2 writers and their peers played a significant factor in the writing process, effecting improvement on writing in a majority of cases. Matsumura et al. clarified that

"teacher feedback about surface features (i.e., word choice, spelling, grammar, and punctuation) during the revision process is associated with higher-quality revisions" (2002, p. 6).

Giving Feedback in a Classroom or Writing Group

Few research studies, on the other hand, have analyzed the impact of *providing* feedback. An exception is Aitchison (2009), whose study at an Australian metropolitan university featured a survey of writing groups that contained "six [to] eight active members in the middle to latter stages of doctoral candidature" from multiple disciplines, incorporating data from a survey, a focus group, and recorded meeting for each group (p. 908). Aitchison's participants reported benefits that occurred "unexpectedly for [students].... when they were engaging in the critique of peers' texts" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 908). Writing group members explained this reciprocal effect of providing feedback in their own terms: "When you're reading somebody else's [writing] and saying 'this doesn't make sense,' or 'this would make more sense up there,' then you think back to your own work and think 'that's what I need to do'" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 913). This reciprocal effect can potentially occur in any context in which feedback is being given and received, such as in a school setting.

This effect is not typically considered by those seeking feedback; instead, participants in writing groups often join them to improve their writing "through the process of submitting their [work] for review by others" (Aitchison, 2009, p. 912). Most lack an awareness for how their writing might benefit from providing feedback to others: "Only two of the 24 who completed the survey nominated 'giving feedback' as a reason for joining, and yet, when asked how they learned, comments about learning from critiquing were as common as claims to have learned from the feedback itself" (p. 912). As one survey respondent explained: "[Reviewing and giving feedback on the writing of others] has emphasized the importance of showing clearly the logic of argument in my own writing" (p. 912).

Maher et al. (2008) also analyzed the benefits of critiquing the writing of others, also focusing on doctoral students in writing groups. They revealed that writing group participants looked to improve their own writing through interaction and feedback with group members, but also received unanticipated benefits to their own writing by critiquing that of others:

> We came to the writing groups with a need to engage with our peers about our writing but also to enlist more systematic support and guidance from experienced academic writers. Working in the writing groups, we not only received invaluable feedback on our

> dissertations, but we also learnt skills to allow us to perform effective critical reviews of our own and others' writing (p. 274).

Both Aitchison's and Maher's participants were doctoral students in university settings, not classroom teachers in P-12 schools. Thus while general benefits of teacher-writer group participation are known, and giving feedback in a writing group also seems to be beneficial (at least to graduate students), previous research has not made clear what specific benefits teacher-writers obtain from giving one another feedback. This question drove the present study. Considering the many demands on a teacher's time and the general lack of official or extrinsic reward for participation in a teacher-writer group, why take part? And more specifically, why focus on someone's writing other than your own?

Methods

This study employed a case study design (Merriam, 1997) focused on an existing teacher-writer writing group. While associated with a university, the group is not a class or official program of the university but rather an informal and loosely organized group of local teachers who had gathered monthly to write for approximately seven years at the time of the research. Meetings are facilitated sometimes by one of two university professors and sometimes by P-12 teachers themselves. A typical meeting includes sharing of writing goals, quiet time for writing, and time for sharing with a partner and/or the whole group. Members also sometimes exchange drafts online for more in-depth feedback. Finally, the members sometimes take up shared writing tasks, including for example a column in the local newspaper, collaborative conference presentations, or producing an anthology of their writing.

The teacher-writer writing group gathered monthly for about 75 minutes per meeting. The group was characterized by a shared goal of coming together to practice and appreciate each other's writing, usually dividing the meeting into fifteen minutes of opening talk, 30-40 minutes of quiet writing time, and then 20-30 minutes of sharing and feedback. The group distinguished itself from the academic environment by providing a space where evaluation, assessment, and grading were tabled, and writing that did not have to be about a particular topic or for an occupational purpose or function could be performed; a space where teachers could become writers together and reconnect to the experience and benefits of writing with others for the sake of writing, sharing, getting feedback, and participating in a writing group. In this way, this teacher-writer writing group created a space where teachers could be writers first that was not defined by the structure, imperatives, and functions of their occupations. Accordingly, the meetings themselves were intentionally held in spaces that were no member's

workplace, not on a school or university campus but instead in a meeting room of either the public library or a local church. This was a community of practitioners who were K-12 teachers, along with two college professors who understood the conditions, concerns, and stresses of their occupational environment who came together away from their workplaces as writers.

We interviewed seven teacher-writers who were members of the group. These seven participants all volunteered to participate in our research when asked; interviews were scheduled outside of the group meeting times. Participants included six women and one man, all white; these demographics are proportionate to the population of teachers in the local area and to the membership of this writing group. The women were all experienced teachers in public schools, ranging from elementary to high school and with a range of nine to 20+ years in the teaching profession. The man was a university professor. All of the participants in this study have been given pseudonyms, and details such as grade taught and years in education are withheld to reduce likelihood of identification in our community. We make no claims for direct generalizability of our findings, particularly with respect to issues where race or ethnicity or location are likely to be of specific relevance, but we do find this group of teachers representative of the local teaching population, with the notable exception that these have elected to participate in a writing group. They have no specific expertise in writing beyond this voluntary participation, the group being open to writers of all skill and experience levels.

A single round of face-to-face open-ended interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted with each of the participants. The interview questions focused on feedback and experiences in writing groups (these questions can be found in Appendix A). Transcripts of these interviews were coded using emergent descriptive and analytic coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We then shared initial themes with both interviewees and other teacher-writers for a form of member-checking. Those teacher-writers identified feedback as an especially salient area; this directed further rounds of analysis. We then also developed an additional question to ask our participants we had interviewed via email directly: "Have you ever experienced any effect on your own writing by giving feedback on the writing of others?" Their responses were added to our existing data and included in the analyses presented here.

Results: "It's a Two-Way Street"

Participants described two categories of benefit to themselves by offering feedback to other teacher-writers. These included, first, benefits to the writer/group, and second, benefits reflected in the written texts themselves.

Across the domains of feedback received and feedback provided, common themes of benefit included claiming authority within a community of writers, developing rapport, and challenging hierarchies of writing teacher and writing student. Taken together, these point to the value of experiences of reciprocity as the central benefit of giving and receiving feedback for teacher-writers.

Benefits to writers of giving feedback

The teacher-writers developed rapport and a supportive group climate by exchanging feedback on one another's writing, contributing to a sense of comfort for sharing and reviewing the work of others, whereas in the past they might have felt uncomfortable doing so. Hierarchical differences of authority between participants, feelings of inadequacy to provide feedback, or a lack of trust in the other members of the group were all acknowledged as factors that complicated the sharing and review aspects of the feedback process.

Reciprocity, in terms of sharing, interacting, providing and receiving feedback, was essential to providing a context wherein the benefits of providing feedback may be explored. For example, Chris indicated that one of the most helpful aspects of a writing group was the sharing and "trading" of ideas: "Trading ideas, comparing ideas, coming up with new ideas." He claimed that this kind of interaction provided inspiration for others: "In some cases, it's also my pieces that jump-start their thinking." Sharon also characterized feedback as "cross-pollination" of ideas, inspired by sharing ideas and writing with other in the group, noting that "Feedback also includes exchanging each other's writing so that we could read each other's writing and that helps give us some ideas too." She focused in particular on the effects of feedback in terms of reviewing another's work during this process of sharing: "So much of what I've learned throughout these last two years is that being able to read another person's work… has given me insights." For Sharon, these "insights" were "deeper understandings" that were uncovered by "peeling back the layers of writing" that primarily come from "having that team of four or five people comprised of two or three people going through the same stage."

Laura explained that, in addition to cross-pollination of ideas and insights, reflection could be shared between group members providing and receiving feedback: "Having a chance to talk about it, and then write. A day or two later, then, having the chance to give it to that person to let them read, and make their notes, and then sit down and look at their notes and their reflections, together." This allowed time not only to reflect, but also to "process" what had been said, and after doing so, a new series of interactions could occur, as the participants got to "volley back and forth, so that I [could] clarify what they meant, and they

[could] provide more, once they hear the kinds of questions that I'm asking about their feedback."

Susan expanded on the functionality of this reciprocal sharing of feedback:

> Being comfortable to be able to go back and say, 'I don't understand what you meant by that comment,' and 'What did you mean?' and 'What made you feel that way?' or say that, 'I thought I covered it here. Did I not?' or 'What was going through your head when you wrote that comment?' Time for the interchange back and forth, at least one round each.

Susan also commented on factors that potentially got in the way of this feedback process between two people, highlighting hierarchical inequalities and differences:

> [The feedback process is something] I don't think, especially in elementary and high school, I don't ever really see happening. There's that hierarchical thing again. 'You gave it to me, I gave you my comments, go fix it.'

Overall, this context of reciprocal feedback framed the potential for impacting teachers' own writing through providing feedback to another, whether the recipient was a member of the writing group, a student, or someone else.

Benefits to one's own writing/texts of giving feedback

Providing feedback to others also had a notable impact on the feedback provider's own written texts. More specifically, providing feedback prompted the teacher-writers to reflexively assess their own capabilities on multiple levels, including the technical, emotional, conscious, and subconscious, through a lens of their own values and concerns. This was a two-way process wherein the reviewer would see others' work through his or her own perspectives on writing, while simultaneously reacting to and learning through the performance of those reviews.

Interviewed participants acknowledged and described this context of reciprocity directly in their comments. Mary called feedback a "two way street," with an added impact of bringing certain aspects of the writing process back into awareness:

> Giving feedback to others has had an effect upon my writing in that it brings the writing process to the forefront of my consciousness. But, it is a two-way street.

Chris expanded on the impacts of this "two way street" to include effects on his own writing in detail:

> I must say that good writing—in journal manuscripts or from students—can influence my tone and style and voice. Reading

> good writing helps me write better—at least, temporarily. I'm sorry to say that bad writing may have the same effect, and I read a lot of bad writing. As a result, my sentences might get shorter. Or longer. Thoughts become fragmented. Or, and this happens with non-English speakers, the writing goes on and on with little punctuation or attention to usage and grammar conventions and is typically full of conjunctions and marks of punctuation for no apparent reason and then ends up being very confusing not just for me but for anyone who might choose to read it whether they have to or not. See what I did there?

Chris is aware of the impacts that providing feedback can have, taking the two-way street metaphor to unsettling places where providers of feedback may even harm or worsen their own writing by reviewing the writing of others. Most teachers, indeed, have had the experience of forgetting how to spell a word after reading it misspelled so many times in student work. Given this interactive transference, not just for ideas and content, but also for form and style, perhaps teachers have even *more* reason than most to seek out writing groups and "good" writing to read and review; as Chris points out, being able to participate as a member of a writing group of one's own peers takes on a new level of importance for those in the field of education given the potential transferred impacts of reading other people's work.

Elisa also affirmed the benefits of the reciprocal effect of reading and reviewing "good writing" on her own writing:

> I find any time I'm looking at someone else's work, it reminds me of things I should be looking at in mine. If I am reading a piece and notice a great use of description, I immediately think about description in my recent writing. Or, if someone has an ending that doesn't quite 'work', I think about mine.

In fact, Elisa went on to explore other ways that this dialogic interaction between provider and receiver of feedback impacted not only the writing, but also the writer. She provided a particular example of this in an account of an interaction that took place between herself and another writer:

> Talking about writing, whether it is my own writing or someone else's writing, can have an impact on me personally, too. For example, during the writing class I took this fall with [the group facilitator], we spent time with a partner sharing our genre project. My partner had a very different piece than mine, and a very different writing style. He suggested I add testimonials to give perspectives other than my own. One might argue that he gave me

> the idea, and he did. But it came from a conversation about different perspectives and the way they impact writing. I think if I hadn't brought that up about his writing, he might not have thought to point it out to me.

In this account, Elisa provided a description of the ways in which the perspectives of the readers and reviewers, as well as the writers, came into play during the course of a feedback session. Ideas developed in dialogue about each other's pieces led to impacts on each provider's own writing—impacts that were not sought after in advance.

While those were effects on the author's writing skills and on written texts, there are also effects on the teacher-writer *as a writer*, a person who writes. These include, for example, emotions. For example, Karen described:

> [I] definitely think there [are] ways that looking at other people's writings and giving them feedback impacts my writing. One way in particular is when you're reading about somebody else's feelings and experiences; it's amazing how [they] can remind you of similar experiences or invoke certain feelings that I may have, but haven't thought about in years. Sometimes those invoked things are feelings and memories may have been buried. So, by having somebody else open up over their experiences, [it] can actually open a little reservoir of thought in [your] own mind.

For Karen, the impact of providing feedback went beyond technical details and ideas to include an emotional dimension, which was reflexively accessed or recalled by reading the work of others. Like a reader who is affected emotionally or psychologically by the content they read, a reviewer can be impacted in a similar fashion by the work they provide feedback on. Chris touched on the potentially multi-layered impacts on a reviewer providing feedback in his response:

> Feedback is a tricky concept isn't it? It's one of those loaded (I sometimes call them, 'blinking') words. Criticism? Emotional support? Encouragement? Humor? As all of these things contribute to your thinking, and, since writing is a manifestation of thinking, how could one not be influenced by giving feedback?

Discussion

The results of this research reveal a "two-way" relationship in the feedback process. Whether it is the cross-pollination of ideas, the discovery of writing characteristics and concerns that one becomes aware of through a critical review of others' work that are in turn useful in your own writing, or the enabling

of one's own authority that comes with giving feedback, reciprocal transfer and nurturing of capability occur when teacher-writers give feedback. These complement the (better-known) benefits of receiving feedback. Feedback is thus dialogic and two-way.

As previous research on teachers' writing groups has demonstrated, these groups are not just about writing; they facilitate feedback through a community of writers (Dawson, Robinson, Hanson, Vanriper, & Ponzio, 2013; Whitney, 2008). In teacher writing groups (as, we would argue, in most any writing group), the writers' differing experiences, capabilities and levels of authority are brought into interaction with each other. To provide feedback within this situated community of the writing group, participants must thus contend with issues of hierarchy, authority, capability, and experience.

The "two-way" transfer and reciprocal effect of feedback between participants explains this. Even between participants situated in inequality, via authority, capability, or some other structural hierarchy, participants in a writing group impact one another, not only through the specific feedback they *receive* on their work but alao, as our interviewees reported, by the reciprocity inherent in *providing* feedback. Consider, then, the classroom situation, in which the teacher (institutionally situated as a figure of higher authority and capability in this scenario) is *still affected* by reviewing the work of his or her students (ostensibly figures of lower authority and capability). When the teacher provides feedback to student writers, he or she is not just affecting their writing, but the process of providing feedback is also affecting *his or her own* writing. This "two-way" transfer and reciprocal effects of the feedback process on all participants—givers and receivers—blurs the line between these roles.

Because of this, we are compelled to reconsider our vulnerability and responsibility in any feedback situation in which we are participants. This includes the classroom, in which the teacher—tasked by his or her professional role with the mandate of providing feedback to his or her students—is reciprocally impacted by providing feedback to his or her students. Since both students and teacher are impacted, both come to the feedback process differently (to some degree) in each successive instance. Thus participants engage a continuously changing situation, even if the participants themselves are the "same" individuals. In other words, feedback changes us, *all* of us in the setting and *reciprocally*.

Whether in the classroom or in writing groups, providing feedback impacted teacher-writers and their writing in a variety of ways: their writing was transformed through inspiration and cross-fertilization of ideas and through stylistic recognitions; as people, they were affected emotionally and

psychologically by what they read and reviewed. The recipients of our feedback thus impact us, both in terms of our written texts and in terms of our identities and practices. This leaves us asking: Do we make sufficient and appropriate use of feedback as a power-shifting, reciprocally impactful practice—in professional development, or in the writing classroom? And if not, why not?

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About the Authors

Lochran C. Fallon spent his early life growing up in central Pennsylvania. He currently holds two Masters degrees from Millersville University in English and English Education and is currently pursuing a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction at the Pennsylvania State University as a fourth year doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education. His dissertation will focus on an original theoretical framework he has been developing called "Mystheory" with direct applications to high school and college classrooms and pedagogy. When he isn't engaged in academic research, he enjoys swimming and traveling.

Anne Elrod Whitney is Associate Professor of Education at the Pennsylvania State University.She researches writing, the teaching of writing, and professional development.