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Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing

Overview

Having students give feedback to one another on their papers can have many advantages: the students get opportunities to develop their ability to give constructive feedback, they receive advice on their drafts, they have a broader audience for their work than just a single instructor, and they see different approaches other students have taken in responding to an assignment. However, peer review has to be carefully managed in order for students to take the process seriously; students tend to be skeptical of the value of receiving feedback from their fellow students rather than instructors. They can regard peer review sessions that provide vague or tangential feedback as "busywork." This handout first describes general considerations that can help improve the quality of the feedback students offer one another before describing several strategies for managing peer review.

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General Considerations

Clarity of Purpose
Students need to know what they are expected to learn from exchanging feedback with their peers. Are you asking them to develop their own analytical skills? To become better proofreaders? To learn how to decide which advice to take as writers? To become more comfortable with the kinds of editorial processes they might encounter in their academic or professional futures? Being explicit about your goals can help them see how the peer review process fits into the larger context of your course.

How to Structure Peer Review
Peer review can be done in pairs, small groups or with the full class. Students can read over their peers' work and prepare comments ahead of time, or students can read shorter works in class and discuss the work afterward. The decision about what structure to use should be based on how much time you have to devote to peer review during a class period (it generally takes 15-20 minutes for students to workshop essays they have read ahead of time), how many essays you would like students to workshop over the course of the term, and how involved you would like to be in the workshop process.

You can use one workshop structure during the term or include a variety of structures. Even if you plan on focusing on small group workshops during the term, you might consider facilitating at least one full-class workshop at the beginning of the term to help model best practices for workshopping. You may also workshop smaller sections of students' essays in class early in the process and then workshop full papers once students have a complete draft. Below are details about the two main structures you might consider when including peer review workshops in your class.

Small Group Workshops
Smaller workshop groups can range in size and in your choice of commenting format (see "Strategies for Peer Review" below). Some options for small-group workshops are asking students to read and respond in class, informally or using more structured feedback sheets, or asking students to read essays posted on a course website and prepare comments ahead of time. The amount of time allotted for workshop as well as students' workload will affect your choice of the structure and size of the small groups.

There are a few considerations to keep in mind when structuring small groups. Students can't be expected to review too many papers for one class session if you want them to write detailed critiques for each draft. Thus, if you are using comment letters, your groups might include only three or four students. If you would like to use groups larger than three or four, you might consider holding peer review in groups of five or six students over the course of two days with two or three students being workshopped each day. This option allows students to receive a greater variety of feedback and see more examples of peers' work. The division of labor matters here, too; each student should be required to critique the same number of essays, so you will need to find a way to divide work evenly.

Students also shouldn't be expected to read essays that are longer than 3-4 pages in class, as this might take up too much class time or overwhelm the students. If students will be reading and responding on the spot, consider asking them to share shorter sections of longer papers.

When using small-group workshops, it can be helpful for the instructor to "float" between groups to make sure students are offering each other sufficiently detailed and engaged feedback. For example, if the reviewers in some groups seem too readily inclined to agree with one another, the instructor might point out that it can be valuable to the writer whose work is under review to hear competing perspectives and probe for those. It can also be useful to "sit in" on a few small groups for an extended period of time, dividing your time among the groups in the class.

Full Class Workshops
Full-class workshops can be helpful for developing shared standards about what to focus on in reviewing a paper and what kind of tone to use in delivering feedback. Many instructors appreciate this structure because it offers students ideas about how to revise their work using a variety of concrete examples from essays in progress.

This method of peer review works best when students have prepared comments on the paper before class and are ready to discuss the work in detail. It also helps for instructors to have prepared their own comments on the paper (using the same format as the students) and to have planned a strategy for leading discussion. You can spend class workshopping one or two sample papers provided by volunteers, divide up the class and workshop one paper per student over the course of the term, or workshop a model paper drawn from past iterations of the same course. The choice about what type and how many full-class workshops to offer depends on how much time you have to devote to workshop during the term and your goals for the workshop and the overall course. If you would prefer that students have more exposure to their peers' work under your guidance, you might choose to schedule more full-class workshops. If you plan to use more small-group workshops throughout the class because you don't have time to workshop every student individually, then offering one or two full-class workshops early in the class might be all that is needed. For a step-by-step process for full-class workshops, see the section below on "Strategies for Full Class Workshops."

With almost any approach to peer review, it can be helpful to make sure that students get feedback from more than one peer on any given assignment. This allows them to have a better sense of whether a particular reader's perceptions of their work is likely to resonate with others. If you use small groups throughout the term, you will need to decide whether to have students work in the same small groups consistently, which can help them develop a sense of camaraderie and investment in one another's work, or whether to change the membership of the groups from one paper to the next. If you would like students to develop greater comfort with each other, you may choose to keep them in the same groups. However, it is also useful to allow students to work with many different writers so they can receive a greater variety of feedback.

When to Schedule Peer Review

Students can benefit from peer review at any stage of the writing process. To decide when to schedule peer review for your students, think about what you hope they will get out of it. If you want students to help each other with the formation of thesis statements or thinking about how to structure their papers, a peer review session early on would be most useful. If you want students to work on helping one another develop their points or polish their prose, scheduling peer review later in the process is probably best. Take care in deciding how peer review will work for your students; different kinds of peer review will better serve different goals, as the varieties of peer review explained below make clear.

Pacing

When students engage in peer review in class—whether they have prepared written materials in advance or not—some groups will finish earlier than others. Letting those groups leave as soon as they have finished can create an incentive for everyone to rush through the peer review process in order to leave early. Thus, it can be useful to either schedule the peer review session first, if more than one activity will take place in class that day, or to ask groups that finish early to engage in follow-up work, such as having each member of the group read through the feedback received and start making notes about how he or she might revise the paper. For suggested activities for students to engage in after workshop see **Supplement 1: Exercises for After Workshop.**

Make It Count

Whatever approach you take—whether you have students take work home or do all of their peer reviewing in class—making the work they do as reviewers count in some way toward their grade can provide an incentive to do this work well. It can also be helpful to provide students with feedback on their feedback, letting them know, for example, whether the comments they are giving one another are tracking issues that are truly relevant to the assignments in question and whether their comments are specific enough to be helpful.

In Practice

Creating an Environment for Useful Feedback

One sure way to make peer review more beneficial for students is to model for them how to give feedback on their peers' writing. You can do this in a number of ways. For example, you might have your class workshop a sample paper from a previous semester and offer suggestions for improving their oral discussion or written comments before asking them to review their current peers' work. You might also show them samples of written student feedback from previous semesters and ask them to discuss the strengths and weakness of that feedback and how they might improve it. Before you model productive peer review for your students, think about what kinds of feedback you want to prime them to give their fellow students.

Additive Comments

Most students equate "peer review" with "criticism," which can be constructive but is not always so. Having students provide only additive feedback—that is, make suggestions only about what the writer might add to or develop in the paper—is one way to help keep peer review positive.

Reader Response

Encouraging your students to be thoughtful readers of their peers' work and to respond to it based on their own experience of the paper as readers is also useful. For instance: "the topic sentence of this paragraph led me to expect you to focus on X, so I was confused that there was so much of Y and Z in this paragraph instead."

Effective Criticism

While modeling useful feedback is key to successful peer review, it's also worthwhile to mention to your students a few categories of less useful comments that are best avoided. One such category is **overly general comments**, such as "I just didn't get it" or "it's great!" The lack of detail in these comments makes them unusable for writers looking to improve their work. **Overly specific comments** are similarly unhelpful. If a peer reviewer focuses, say, on the writer's use of commas or comments excessively on a single point or idea to the exclusion of others, that doesn't give the writer the kind of substantive feedback that is most helpful for revision. Finally, and obviously, **personal insults** or feedback that gets too personal really have no place in peer review. Comments like 'this is a stupid idea" or "how lame" will not help any writer revise.

Strategies for Peer Review: Comments Prepared Before Class

There are many forms of peer review that ask students to study one another's papers carefully outside of class. One advantage to this is that it signals to students that you expect them to invest real time and thought in giving one another feedback. Writing the feedback in advance can help students prepare for face-to-face workshops held in class. A sample prompt for guiding students through in-class workshops based on reviews written in advance can be found in **Supplement 2: Guidelines for Small Group Workshop.** For some guidelines for in-class small group workshops that include multilingual writers, see **Supplement 2b: Guidelines for Small Group Workshops Including Multilingual Students.**

Strategy 1: Comment Letters

Comment letters analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a draft and make suggestions for revision. Sample prompts for writing such a letter can be found in **Supplement 3: How to Write A Peer Critique.**

Strategy 2: Overview and Marginal Comments

This approach asks students to replicate a commenting method commonly used by writing instructors. Reviewers write one or two paragraphs at the beginning or end of the paper about what is working well and what needs improvement, and they make notes in the margins throughout the paper that direct the writer's attention to specific places that are particularly strong or weak. A sample prompt for this approach can be found in **Supplement 4: Structured Commenting Protocol.**

Strategy 3: Commenting Forms

Forms can be used to prompt reviewers to address specific issues in the papers they analyze. These are most effective when they ask open-ended questions about how and why various elements of a paper are or aren't working well, rather than questions to which a reviewer can simply reply "yes" or "no." A sample of an effective commenting form can be found in **Supplement 5: Peer Critiques Handout.**

Strategies for Peer Review: Comments Prepared During Class

Strategy 1: Commenting Forms

Often instructors make use of commenting forms for in-class peer review. This is useful to do especially when it is advantageous to have the instructor on hand to provide guidance or feedback to students as they work though peer review, or when it is useful to the student completing the peer review to have the writer on hand to answer questions or discuss feedback. For this kind of peer review, it is essential that students bring hard copies of their papers for each peer reviewer or that electronic access to papers is available to peer reviewers during class. The same commenting forms used for take-home peer review can be used for in-class peer review. (See an example in **Supplement 5: Peer Critiques Handout.**)

Strategy 2: Self-Evaluation

When students get used to performing peer review on their fellow students' work and anticipate that doing so will be a regular part of a writing assignment, it is often valuable and interesting to ask them instead to perform a self-evaluation of their own work. This requires students to take a step back from their own writing, read it with a critical eye, and consider it from an outsider's perspective. While a form that guides students through this process is often helpful, you can also ask students to respond to their own work using a list of criteria they extract from the writing prompt or your grading rubric. It is useful to ask students to perform such self-evaluations in class, so that you can be on hand to offer guidance and feedback.

Strategy 3: "Speed" Peer Review

This method of peer review can be a useful tool when many students are struggling with a particular aspect of the assignment or desire feedback at an early stage. It works well with any part or aspect of the paper that can be fairly quickly read and for which the instructor or students can identify correct or desirable components. A good "speed" peer review could be performed, for instance, on thesis statements. For such an exercise, students should bring printed versions of their thesis statements to class. Chairs should be arranged in a circle, and the class should come to a consensus about how exactly they should respond to the thesis. For instance, students might focus on whether the thesis is specific enough or how it responds to the prompt. The instructor then has students pass papers to the right and gives students three minutes to read and offer written feedback under the thesis in front of them. After three minutes, students pass papers to the right again, and the process is repeated. In this way, in less than ten minutes, students can get several different perspectives on the effectiveness of their theses.

This method could be used on other parts of the paper as well, such as the introduction or the conclusion, a paragraph that integrates evidence and analysis, a paragraph that focuses on a counterargument, the methods or discussion section of a lab report, etc.

Strategies for Full-Class Workshops

Strategy 1: Facilitating a Full-Class Workshop on a Model Essay

It can be useful to use a sample essay to model the tone and the process of workshops for students who will be engaging in full-class or small-group workshops throughout the term. A model workshop could also provide students with an example of how to write the essay assignment in question.

Select a student paper from a past iteration of the class (with the permission of the student) that will provide an example of either a successful or unsuccessful response to the essay assignment (or a mixture of both; a B-range paper is often a good choice). Ask the students to read this essay ahead of time, using one of the methods above for preparing comments before class or provide them with the handout in **Supplement 6: Student Guidelines for Full-Class Workshop.**

Prepare your own comments based on the key writing issues that are present in the sample paper, making sure to focus on issues of global concerns, such as the argument, evidence, analysis, and organization. Try to keep your global concerns limited to three or four major issues, and select specific passages of the paper that illustrate these issues to share in class. If you would also like to discuss sentence-level issues, select two or three sentences to highlight.

In class, direct students to the passages you highlighted and ask them what issues they notice. Once you have covered the issues fully, open the floor to general comments and questions by students and respond to their comments by offering clarifications of your expectations for the assignment. For more details on facilitating full-class workshops, see **Supplement 7: Instructor Guidelines for Facilitating Full-Class Workshops.**

Strategy 2: Workshopping All Students in Full-Class Workshops

One common strategy that comes from the Writing Workshop tradition used in Master of Fine Arts programs is to workshop at least one essay per student throughout the course of the term. Using this strategy will require devoting a number of class sessions to peer review workshops, but the benefits are that each student will receive substantial feedback guided by you on at least one draft, and each full-class workshop will allow for concrete conversations about the different issues that inevitably—and sometimes unexpectedly—will come up in drafts. Often this strategy will provide students with a clearer sense of your expectations on the essay, regardless of whether their paper is being workshopped or not.

This strategy will require that a handful of students are workshopped for each paper assignment over the course of the term, so you'll need to create a schedule at the beginning of the class. For example, for a class of 18 students with 3 major essay assignments, 6 students will need full-class workshops during each paper sequence. Because workshop preparation takes time and each workshop can be expected to last around 20-25 minutes, you should not expect to workshop more than 3 or 4 students per 80-minute class. Full-class workshops can be paired with small-group workshops for the students who are not being workshopped by the full class, so that all students will receive feedback for each essay assignment. If you plan to use full-class workshops, it will be important to set aside dates on your syllabus and create a sign-up sheet.

Before each workshop, each student being workshopped should post their essay on a course website for other students to access. Then students should download and prepare for the workshop before the class using one of the Strategies for Comments Prepared Before Class listed above. Or, for a handout to provide students before workshop, see **Supplement 6: Student Guidelines for Full Class Workshop.** On the workshop day, you should plan to facilitate discussion, directing students to global issues in each essay and pointing out key issues that you feel will help students succeed. For more detailed guidelines for facilitating full-class workshops, see **Supplement 7: "Instructor Guidelines for Facilitating Full-Class Workshops."**

Strategy 3: Using the "Process for Critical Response" Method

The Process for Critical Response is a method of feedback that comes of out a performance setting. It was created as a way to encourage dialogue between the artist and the audience during the development of a dance or theater piece. This method is different from a reader-response method. While many workshops require the writer to remain quiet while the readers provide feedback, the goal of the Process for Critical Response is to foster a conversation centered around neutral questions and to give the writer more control of the workshop by requiring that the audience members ask the writer permission before offering critical opinions. This method can be used with either full-class or small groups, though it is generally best used with full-class workshops, as it is important to have a facilitator present to make sure comments are framed as neutral questions.

For the steps involved in this workshop format, see **Supplement 8: Guidelines for The Process for Critical Response.**

Peer Review and Students' Experiences

Most students greatly appreciate the opportunity to read their peers' papers and receive feedback from peers on their own work. When students resist or complain about peer review, it is often for one of three reasons, each of which is easily addressed.

"I'm getting mixed messages."

Sometimes students have difficulty deciding between conflicting comments from their peers. It can be helpful to acknowledge that choosing which advice to follow is not always easy and to provide opportunities for your students to talk with you, either in writing or in person, before they decide what to do. For example, you might have them complete a simple questionnaire immediately after the review session that includes questions such as, "What is the most important revision you plan to make to this paper?" and "What questions do you still have about how to revise this draft?" For more suggestions for helping students navigate feedback given during peer review, see the section on "Monitoring Exercises" in the Sweetland Teaching Resource **Metacognition – Cultivating Reflection.**

"Who am I to judge?"

Some students are self-conscious about their own adequacy as evaluators of other students' work; they feel that, as peers, they do not have superior experience or knowledge and are in fact so in need of help with their own writing that they cannot possibly offer valuable feedback to a fellow student. An easy and honest reply to this kind of trepidation is that peer review is not about making definite pronouncements, but rather about offering advice, which writers can consider and then apply only if it seems helpful. In addition, it is arguable that, as a student in the same class, the peer reviewer knows more about the expectations of the assignment and the challenges it presents than anyone except the instructor. The peer reviewer is actually *more*, not *less* qualified than an "expert" from outside the class.

"The peers who read my paper never give me helpful feedback."

Occasionally students will complain that the advice and comments about their papers that they receive from peers is unhelpful. Even for students who feel this way, peer review can still be a useful process because it is not only the feedback a writer gets that makes peer review valuable, but also the opportunity to read and, more importantly, critique other students' work. The exercise of analyzing and explaining how a peer tackles an assignment—or fails to—should make a writer think more deliberately about his or her own work. UM instructor Jeremiah Chamberlin has written a helpful short essay about this aspect of peer review available here (**http://www.glimmertrain.com/fmjan09.html**).

Evaluating Peer Review as an Instructor

After your students complete peer review, you likely will want to gauge its effectiveness. There are various ways to go about doing this. One is to collect rough drafts with final drafts and do a quick comparison of them (consider using the "Merge Documents" feature in Word if you collect the papers electronically)—did peer review inspire the kinds of revision you wanted? You can also ask students to write a brief response to peer review, explaining how they think it went, which advice they took, and what was most useful and why. If you ask them to give you this information, they will likely want to know what you think of their decisions. Finally, if you plan to use peer review multiple times during your course, it will be useful to give your students feedback on the quality of their responses to help them improve their commenting skills.

Ideally, you should offer them written feedback on their comments to others (details about what they did well and about where their feedback might have been made clearer or more specific). In addition, you might choose to grade their feedback as an incentive to help them improve. An example of a simple rubric that could be used to grade peer review letters or forms can be found in **Supplement 9: Grading Criteria for Peer Critiques.** For helpful guidelines to grading peer review letters or forms by multilingual writers, see **Supplement 9b: Grading Criteria for Peer Critiques of L2 and L1 Writers.**

Resources to add to original list:

Chamberlain, Jeremiah. "Workshop Is Not for You." *Glimmer Train*, 2009. Web. 14 Aug. 2014. http://www.glimmertrain.com/fmjan09.html

No One Writes Alone: Peer Review in the Classroom, A Guide For Instructors. *MIT TechTV*, 2011. Web. 14 Aug. 2014. http://video.mit.edu/watch/no-one-writes-alone-peer-review-in-the-classroom-a-guide-for-students-8336/

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