

## Peer Review – Worth a Second Try

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In my first semester of teaching composition, I launched into peer review with many expectations: the students would enjoy doing something different, they would understand the responsibilities as assigned to them, they would appreciate the benefits of fellow student's opinion, and, lastly, that would understand that the peer review session was worth 20% of the 'critique' unit grade. The project failed miserably. Not one of my expectations was met. The first mistake I made was with the initial setup of the session. I had my students pair up on their own and, naturally, they simply turned to the person sitting next to them. The reason this proved to be a problem was because I had an athletic section which was composed of girls from the swim team as well as some hockey players, so they were each sitting next to someone they knew very well. Because of this, they were resistant to giving any type of criticism to each other, and as I walked around the room to observe their progress, I repeatedly heard "I don't know what to say..." My second mistake was that I had given them a checkmark system worksheet (see appendix A) to use in evaluating their peer's paper, and that type of worksheet was not beneficial because all of the students who participated (I did not have 100% participation because not every student brought a paper) checked "yes" for every category, and their comments were typically "I like your paper" or "your paper is great." I want to try this activity again next semester, but before I do so I need to have a realistic attitude toward the peer review process. I am utilizing this 625 project to research peer review, and I plan to incorporate my findings into a *successful* peer review session next fall.

When I began researching peer review, I was relieved to discover not only that “many teachers count among their worst disasters the collaborative assignment gone wrong” (Howard 55) but also that “peer response, having been the subject of numerous studies, has a track record of conflicting results” (Harris 377). What a relief to know that I was not alone! I found that peer review tends to raise many difficult issues for instructors, and one of these is “the inherent conflict between the university’s need to recognize collaborative work as a model that serves students well in their careers and lives, and the need to teach students to do their own, independent work” (McCabe and Cole 40). I conclude from that statement that collaboration is an essential tool that students will need upon entering the workforce, and also that it is important for them to understand that collaboration can lead to improvements with their own independent collegiate work.

The first step to a successful session, according to my research, is to have well-articulated guidelines. Nowhere in my syllabus had I mentioned peer review, so it was completely unexpected when I introduced it in the critique unit. My curriculum up until that unit had been as follows: Their first assignment was a summary paper, of which I collected first drafts, let them revise, and then corrected their revised drafts for the final unit grade. Their second assignment was a synthesis paper, of which I followed the same format. Their third assignment was a critique paper. For this paper, their first draft was read by their peers during ‘peer review day’, and I told them that I would only be reading their final drafts. This completely freaked them out, because this announcement was so out of the blue. I realize now that students do not like surprises, and that if peer review had been outlined in the syllabus as well as mentioned in the first week of class, they would have known to expect it.

When laying out the guidelines, it seems to me that it will also be very important to reassure the students of what their role as a peer reviewer specifically entails. They need to understand that I do not expect them to ‘play teacher’ but rather to give feedback as helpful and interested peers. I know that they may not be expert writers, but I also know that they are knowledgeable and completely capable of giving beneficial responses to a fellow student’s writing.

There are negative aspects to peer review that need to be dealt with as well, because ignoring them may result in an unsuccessful session, regardless of the fine-tuned planning. One negative aspect, as addressed by Harris, is that “some students dismiss peer responses because they question the skills of the person offering the advice” (378). If the instructor receives this kind of reaction, a strong counter-response could be that peer review should be looked at as a selfish element of class work; that the students should consider what they themselves will get out of it by editing someone else’s work. Reinking and Osten state that “for those acting as peer readers, a critical response to another person’s paper helps develop the kind of eye they can eventually apply to their own writing. Often students detect a problem in someone else’s paper and then recognize that they have the same problem” (70). Another counter-response could be to reiterate that each student in the classroom is educated, and therefore capable of giving constructive criticism, and that their papers are not just private correspondence between the student and the instructor.

I discovered that there are three suggested ways to approach peer review: the first is for students to pair up, read each other’s paper, respond to and make suggestions in writing for improving the paper, and then discuss each other’s written comments. This is the method I tried last semester.

The second approach is group rotation. Dana Herreman prefers to run peer review using this method. She suggests dividing the class into groups, and then rotating each student's paper from group to group, with each group having one specific editing task, such as sentence structure, punctuation, word choice, etc... In this way, "compositions are circulated from group to group and then returned to the author with each group's suggestions" (7). The key is to keep them on task with only a certain amount of time, and then rotate each paper to the next group. Muriel Harris' strategy is similar to Herreman's.

Susanna Engbers uses whole-class peer review. She calls it "publishing day," a term she borrowed from Donald Murray. The details of her process are as follows: students come to class having already read a fellow student's paper. When the 20-30 minute session begins, two of the students (other than the author) are named 'lead critics' who share the responsibility of directing the session. Even though the students have read the paper before coming to class that day, the paper is also read aloud by someone other than the author at the beginning of the session. A tip she offers is to not get frustrated with simplified comments from students like "I liked" this or that. She says that these kinds of gut responses are actually helpful because they "get students warmed up and prepare the way for more substantive comments" ("A Story"). If a student makes that kind of simplified comment, Engbers responds with something similar to this: "I liked it too. Exactly why did you like it?" She offers a tip for the lead critics as well: "lead critics should be encouraged to modify the prompts for their particular essay, making sure to avoid asking 'yes-no' questions. The important thing is to raise the discussion above grammar and mechanics to issues of content and structure" ("A Story"). Although I am intrigued by this method, I have a problem with this format because I have 25 students, and at 20-30 minutes per paper, it is not plausible for me to devote that kind of class time to peer review done in such a way. I would

need to forgo other things in my curriculum plan to allow for this time-consuming method, and I am not sure it would be worth the sacrifice.

Regardless of the method I choose to follow, Edgar Thompson points out that a demonstration before the actual session begins is the key to a successful peer review. In order to contribute my own personal findings to this research, I recently worked off of Thompson's example with my composition students for the purpose of putting their responses into this paper. I explained to them the purpose of this paper, and then I handed out the following essay, taken from Thompson's article:

*An Embarrassing Experience*

*When I were in high school we had a football Banquite and I had not Ben to a fromer accesson Befor. And I also included a young lady along.*

*I were like the young man in the story we read in class.*

*I came to the Banquite Poper dressed But I did not have no table Manner. Everyone Began to set down, I did not know I sirpose to assit the young lady with chair until she told me. After about 30 min they guss spoke Began to spake I did not know when to Began to eat & after I saw all the other People eating I look around for my silverware. But I did not have any, then I tryed to get the water attanson. They finily Brage me my silverware. I thought that were the lose embarrassment monet for tonight, But they had just Began. The main dish were chicken & it were fried cripe and when I Bit off it, it wouldl make a loud nose and the other People would look around at me & my date would look the other way. From then on I promer myself I would learn good table manner (110).*

I gave the students a few minutes to read this essay and write down their peer review responses. When I asked them to voice what they had written, the students naturally (and eagerly) criticized the grammar, spelling, and punctuation. After the students were finished sharing their comments, I read them Thompson's response:

*I know what it is like to be in such situations. I've been put in embarrassing situations many times in my life.*

- 1.) Why don't you write some more about what happened to you at the banquet? Did people give you a bad time about it later? What did your date say to you?*
- 2.) Something else: Typically capital letters are needed only at the beginning of a sentence or with proper nouns (actual names of things, like Robert or St. Louis). Go back through your paper and add capital letters where you need them and remove them elsewhere (110).*

When I asked the students what the difference was between Thompson's response and their own, they commented much the same as Thompson's own students did when partaking in this activity. They recognize that Thompson first commented on the content, and then addressed only one of the mechanical issues. I then followed Thompson's suggestion, and told the class that when they participate in peer review as an actual activity, it is "best to identify something positive about the paper before moving on to items or issues that may need to be resolved during revision" (111).

While researching this topic, I discovered why my checklist (appendix A) was unsuccessful. Paton writes that "the least productive are checklists that employ the same basic criteria each time" because "apart from being boring to work with, such checklists usually consist of yes or no questions that invite simple yes or no answers"(294). She suggests that it is better to tailor worksheets to fit the demands of the assignment. I plan to use the following template in the fall, altering it in accordance with the unit I choose to do the peer review in:

- *What is the main point of this essay?*
- *What is the biggest problem?*
- *What is the biggest strength?*
- *What material doesn't seem to fit the main point or the audience?*
- *What questions has the author not answered?*
- *Where should more details or examples be added? Why?*
- *At what point does the paper fail to hold my interest? Why?*
- *Where is the organization confusing?*
- *Where is the writing unclear or vague?*

After this research, I feel that I am well armed with the information that I need to try peer review again. I am confident that my preparedness will result in a successful session. I do regret the feeling that my composition students last semester were, in essence, guinea pigs in what seemed to be my trial-and-error way of teaching. I sincerely hope that that will not happen again.

The next time I try peer review I will most definitely have well-articulated guidelines. I plan to use the group-rotation approach rather than the pairs approach because I believe it will not only produce more thorough feedback (because each group will be designated a specific task) but also each student will receive input from more than one peer. I strongly believe that peer review is worth a second try, because research shows that when it is successful, the benefits the students reap are abundant.

## Works Cited

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