

Revision Comments in Peer Review Groups

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**Note — Please see MLK for related materials, such as tables, that are not included in the web version of this paper.*

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The role of peer review groups within the English classroom has been examined from several different angles. In peer review groups students respond to one another's writing in hopes of enhancing the work. Some groups conference verbally and in writing, while other groups exchange papers and make only written responses. Students in peer review groups are expected to edit for mechanical and grammatical problems, and they are expected to respond to the organization and content of the work. Revision groups, some researchers say, tend to help students develop a better sense of audience. The groups also help teachers by relieving some of the burden of reviewing and offering feedback between drafts.

Unfortunately, what has not been thoroughly addressed is the value of the types of written responses students make within these peer review groups. Are students simply making grammatical and mechanical corrections or are they making critical responses about the content of the work?

In order for English teachers to make an informed decision on the use of peer review groups, teachers should be aware of the revision responses students typically offer. While mechanical and grammatical corrections are a valid part of the revision process, the revision process must also include a "re-thinking" of the work at various draft stages. The procedure, for students doing peer review as practiced by the teacher in this study, calls for students to write two drafts for each assignment. The teacher gives students a lesson in the revision and editing skills at the beginning of the school year. These revision rubrics are referred to during the remainder of the school year. The teacher follows up the rubrics with mini-lessons on various writing techniques including: figurative language, detail, and organization. Students respond to the draft of the paper with little verbal exchange. This procedure is one instructor's way of practicing peer reviewing in the classroom. When students review each other's drafts in this environment, will they make detailed content revisions or will they merely make grammatical and mechanical corrections?

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF EXISTING LITERATURE

The writing process and revision:

In order to fully understand the concept of peer reviewing, teachers must first understand the writing process and the role of revision in that process. The writing process has been studied, discussed, and analyzed in many ways since its inception. These studies have yielded several different models, many of which seem to be linear; moreover, they separate the writing process into discrete stages. Two typical models are by Gordon Rohman and James Britton. Rohman suggests that the composing process moves from prewriting to writing to rewriting, and the writing process Britton advocates is a series of stages described in metaphors of linear growth, conception-incubation-production (Sommers 1980). The problem is both models are based on speech rather than on the actual writing process. The models ignore the need for a writer to refer back to the work throughout the drafting stage. In the linear model the revision process is seen as a separate stage at the end of the writing process. Most writers realize this is not true. Revision is an on going process.

Revision, Sommers asserts, is "a sequence of changes in a composition-changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work" (Sommer 1980). Revision may be the most frustrating writing skill to teach and to learn. Revision should be addressed as just that- a "re-seeing" of a piece of writing. Many English teachers, however, complain that students do not revise their writing. At best, the students make only cosmetic changes from the first draft to the final piece (Kirby and Liner 1980).

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Collaboration in the English Classroom:

Peer review groups are a specific case of the general technique of collaborative learning. All members of

the process learn from each other. In this case, collaborative learning comes from the potential transfer of learning between the writer and reviewer.

English teachers often feel it is common logic to incorporate collaborative learning in their classroom. It makes sense that if students receive response to their writing, they may be able to improve it. When students take an active role in their education, the learning experience becomes more meaningful for them (Brunjes 1993). However, for collaborative learning to be effective, the teacher must spend the time necessary to instruct the students in the required skills. Students left on their own, with no group work instruction, will gain little from the experience. The goals for the groups must be established and the teacher must maintain control over the classroom. If students are instructed in collaborative learning, the role of peer review groups can be valuable to the English teacher. Research suggests that the significance of audience plays a vital role in the writing process. Response groups help the writer develop a sense of audience and how to communicate effectively with the audience (Brunjes 1993).

Revision in Peer Review Groups:

Revision is a difficult skill for any writer to master. It is also one of the most important components in helping students gain confidence as writers (Stetson 1994). The study described here will examine the role of revision; specifically, the role of peer reviews in the writing process. In order to use peer review groups, teachers must fully understand the revision process and act of collaborative learning within the overall writing process. Peer reviews set up a transfer of knowledge between a writer and reviewer. Each student gets an opportunity to act as a reviewer and share their knowledge of the writing process with another writer. This sharing of ideas and knowledge helps student writers better "see" their written work.

Peer reviewing was developed in the late 1960s. It was used then, as it is now, to encourage students to read and critique each other's writing to improve each participant's work. The value for the writer was the feedback that encouraged help in re-thinking the piece for organization, content, and mechanics. For the reviewer, the value was an ability to internalize the lessons being taught by the English teacher. This helped the reviewer when he was involved in his own writing. Several studies undertaken in the 70s and 80s indicated that students in peer review groups made greater gains in writing quality than students in teacher evaluated groups (Ford 1973, Lagana 1974, Karegianes, Pascarella, and Pflaum 1980). Teachers cited several advantages to using peer reviews in their writing groups: students developed a better sense of audience, teachers were freed from serving as sole authority, the quantity of paper grading was reduced, and students were exposed to several different writing styles (Gere 1985).

Audience plays a significant role in the writing process. Research also suggests that the writing teacher may be a threat to the student writer. While young writers often prefer to write for a "significant adult," adolescents can find the teacher too significant an audience. As a result, they tend to write what they think the teacher wants to hear. They may even ignore a teacher's comment feeling "adults just can't understand." While research indicates that students may write differently depending on the audience, we know very little about the effects of audience on the actual peer review process. One can surmise that students will respond more critically to an anonymous piece of writing, than to the writing of a peer. Once again, little research is available on the effect of audience on response. At best, peer reviewing has been shown to improve the learning environment by fostering a sense of trust and sharing among students.

Limitations of peer reviewing in existing literature:

Studies, however, have uncovered serious limitations in peer review groups. Teachers cite as problems uncritical revision comments, lack of student preparation, and loss of classroom control (Graner 1987). These limitations pertain to the classroom environment not the writing process. The loss of control and lack of preparation are not factors of the writing process, but of classroom management. These limitations give no significant information on the use of peer review groups. The more valid limitations are those found from the student's point of view. While students share their ideas with one another, they are reluctant to give feedback that involves any implicit or explicit evaluation. Students feel uncomfortable making negative comments, so reviewing sessions are reduced to recitations of mutual compliments unsupported by content (Freedman 1987, Graner 1987). Teachers and students must understand the various kinds of peer collaboration. Students collaborate to generate topics, analyze content, and to help with editing.

Although peer reviewing may save the teacher some evaluating time, for the process to be effective the group must still spend time learning and developing the interpersonal and editing skills necessary for the peer editing process (Beaven 1977). Peer groups also require constant checks by the teacher. The teacher must be sure the students understand the rubrics and stay on task during the review sessions. Individual conferences are a necessity to the writing/revision process, and these conferences also take

valuable teacher time (Hardaway 1975).

Many teachers value peer review groups more than students do. Students are more interested in the "right" answer and doubt that they can get valid revision suggestions from their peers (Pritchard 1987). This thought was echoed by teachers responding to a 1987 survey by Sarah Freedman. Teachers responding to Freedman's survey believed they were the most useful responder to student's writing (Freedman 1987). These teachers did not trust the peer editing process. Teachers have discovered peers correcting passages with no real errors. This creates a situation where teachers have to correct the miscorrections, which is both time-consuming and frustrating (Beaven 1977).

More information is needed:

While most of the literature agrees that the collaborative act of peer reviewing is a valuable learning tool for students, the research done to date says very little about its actual benefits for the student's written work. Gere and Abbott looked at the types of writing students were using in writing groups. However, their research was based on the types of oral comments students made within writing groups. The comments student reviewers make in writing are apt to be different from those they make verbally. A study by Ellmann touches briefly on written comments. He found that given the opportunity to respond in writing, students resort to clichés and generalizations: "It wasn't very good," or "I really felt what she was trying to say," or even "That was the best story I ever read!" These comments offer little meaningful criticism and serve no meaningful role in encouraging students to further develop details or better organize a piece of writing (Ellmann 1975).

The purpose of this study is to examine the written comments being made by students in peer review groups in the type of environment previously described. It seeks to answer four main questions: 1) what types of comments are being made by senior high students in peer review groups; 2) how do students view the peer reviewing process; 3) how does the instructor view the process; 4) is this instructor's version of the process approach and the use of collaboration a successful one?

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METHODS

Subjects and setting:

This study was conducted at a rural senior high school in upstate New York. It took place during an eight week period of student teaching beginning in January and ending in March. Nine twelfth grade students who were involved in an advanced writing workshop were observed. This English class was chosen because it worked in a writing workshop environment and spent considerable amounts of time in writing activities. The class met daily in an English room equipped with computers and one instructor. Students were expected to write three or four days per week on topics assigned by the instructor.

Design:

When this study began, the participants had been practicing peer review since the beginning of the school year in September. Each writing assignment went through two drafts.

After the students wrote their first draft, they exchanged their papers. Drafts were read silently and reviewed by one peer. Reviewers were to make any responses directly on the written piece.

Student reviewers were given a grade sheet (Appendix 1) that provided the expectations for their reviews. This grade sheet detailed the value of the editing skills performed. The grades filled in on the sheet became part of the reviewer's final grade on the project, not the writer's final grade. The purpose of the grade sheet was to give the reviewing assignment value to the reviewer. Each reviewer received a grade based on the instructor's perception of the responses made on the work. The following types of information were included on the grade sheet: punctuation, spelling, and content.

Students received mini-lessons throughout the year, which focused on organization, detail, figurative language, and other writing skills. Students were expected to use these lessons when responding to their peer's work. No additional written rubrics were provided. While students were expected to use the information provided in the mini-lessons, they were not given any forms or reminders to assist them. Once the students reviewed the work, it was returned to the instructor for review of the grade sheet. The instructor completed the grade sheet and returned the work to the writer. The writer then addressed the comments made on the work. Following this stage of revision, the final draft of the work was submitted for grading by the instructor.

The peer review groups were randomly established by the instructor. Students remained in these groups for the first half of the school year and the groups were re-selected for the second half of the year. Students in this study were in their second review group.

Data Collection:

For this study students were asked to respond in their usual manner to two types of writing: a literary analysis paper and a self-selected essay. This process gave the students two genres of writing to consider. In each case the students used the reviewing process described earlier.

The literary analysis was selected because each student had a requirement to write one literary analysis paper for the term, thus eliminating any problems with an inability to revise based on a lack of knowledge. The self-selected essay was selected as a different genre of writing. This gave the student two distinct types of writing to revise. The students were asked to submit the work they felt reflected their best effort.

All written information from the student reviewers was collected. All copies of the grade sheets, with teacher evaluations, paper drafts with editing comments, and final drafts were collected by the researcher. As the researcher, I acted as an observer to the writing process. The setting and classroom environment were controlled by the instructor and run in her normal manner. In addition to the written information from the students, I collected students surveys (Appendix 2). The surveys were designed to ascertain the students' views on peer reviewing. Did they understand how to peer review and did they find it beneficial? An interview with the instructor was also conducted (Appendix 3). The goal was to understand her goals for peer reviewing and her thoughts on how to teach peer reviewing in the classroom.

Methods for Analyzing the Data:

In order to analyze the responses made by student reviewers in peer review groups, I used the categories of form, content, and reference established by Gere and Abbott in "Talking about writing groups: The language of writing groups" (1985).

To assess form I did an overall analysis of the comments made on grammar, writing mechanics, and spacing errors- the surface level of the written piece. For this study the content category was analyzed in terms of style. To investigate content style, I looked for comments that addressed the phrasing, grammar, and organization of the piece. The reference category included comments that specifically led the writer to a re-seeing of a certain area, any questions the reviewer brought up, and any comments that specifically addressed missed details of information. Reference comments addressed any missing details within the written work.

For triangulation, I also analyzed the student surveys and the interview with the instructor to see if the goals of peer reviewing from the instructor's point of view and the students' point of view matched.

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RESULTS

The Writing Samples:

Nine writing samples were analyzed for this study. Students selected what they considered to be their best effort for inclusion in the study. Three samples were self selected essays and six were literary analysis papers. The total number of corrections made on the peer reviewed papers was 207. A total of 56 corrections were made on the self selected essay papers. There were 151 corrections made on the literary analysis papers. (See Chart 1)

One hundred and twenty-six form corrections were made on the papers. Thirty-seven , or 66% , of the corrections made to the self selected essays were form corrections. Eighty-nine, or 59%, of the corrections on literary analysis papers were form corrections. The majority of corrections were in punctuation. Students were aware of comma placement problems, capitalization errors, missing apostrophes, and omitted periods. Students made 17 of these types of corrections on their peers self-selected papers. Punctuation corrections were also the highest category for the literary analysis papers. Peer reviewers made 47 punctuation corrections on the papers they reviewed. A total of 64 punctuation corrections were made, 51% of the total form corrections. Following punctuation corrections, students most often made spelling corrections. Fifteen spelling corrections were made on the self selected essays and 21 spelling corrections were made on the literary analysis papers. These 36 corrections equal 29% of the form corrections made. The additional areas analyzed (spacing problems, indentation/paragraph problems and subject/verb agreement problems) made up 20% of the corrections in the form category.

The content style area was analyzed in the following categories: word choice/re-phrasing suggestions, word placement in the sentence/sentence placement in the paragraph, comments directed at redundancy, and comments directed at run-on or awkward sentences. By far, the most comments made on either style of paper were those related to word choice and re-phrasing. These comments included cases where the reviewer crossed out one word or a small group of words and made suggestions for another word or phrase. For example, Remy, writing on Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, wrote "YLongbourn that will be owned by Mr. Bennets' cousinY" The reviewer suggested she change "will be owned by" to "will be inherited by." These types of style issues accounted for 64 of the 78 corrections made in the content style category, or 82%. Nine of these corrections were made on the self selected essays and 33 were made on the literary analysis papers. The next most frequent content style corrections dealt with the placement of words within a sentence or sentences within a paragraph. This accounted for eight, 10%, of the content corrections made on the papers. These types of comments encouraged the writer to place specific words or phrases in different parts of the sentence. Tasha's paper featured a suggestion to add the phrase "in addition to these problemsY" at the beginning of her sentence instead of ending with that line. Only one awkward/run on sentence was noted in the peer editing remarks made on the papers. Five references to redundancy were noted. All five references were on the literary analysis papers written.

Of the 207 corrections made on papers analyzed, only .4% were comments that asked the writer to re-see or re-think any specific passages. The reference category included only three comments. Each of these three comments was made on literary analysis papers. One example of a reference comment was found on Remy's analysis of Pride and Prejudice. The reviewer asked Remy to consider whether or not she agreed with a quote made by Virginia Woolf regarding Austen's work. Remy used the quote, "Of all great writers, she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness." Remy offered no support for or against the opinion stated by Woolf. By drawing her attention to this point, the reviewer actually encouraged her to further explore her position on Austen and the novel. Unfortunately, this issue was ignored when Remy wrote her final draft of the literary analysis of Pride and Prejudice.

The next reference comment was written on Tiffany's literary analysis of John Cheever's Falconer. The reviewer encouraged the writer to explore the relationship between the main character, Farragut, and his wife. Again, the comment was ignored on the final draft of the paper.

The last reference comment was made on a literary analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* by Dannele. The reviewer suggested that Dannele further explain her idea that Darcy is afraid to fall in love with a "poorer woman." On the final draft, this section was totally eliminated by the student writer.

Genre did not seem to affect the revision comments made on papers. The numbers were consistent in Form and Content Style corrections. Students did make References comments on the literary analysis papers, but in a very insignificant number. Genre appears to have had little effect on the peer review groups in these study.

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SURVEYS:

Each student who submitted work for analysis also answered the student survey (Appendix 2). Students were asked to define peer editing and analyze the types of feedback they give on peer reviews. Students were also asked to consider how beneficial they found peer editing as a writer.

Students defined peer editing as a proofreading of their paper by a classmate. One student, Dannele, went on to say that "peer editing is a systematic approach to finding errors in a piece of work." In each case the student said that the peer editor's job was to "make corrections" of the work. No students implied that the editor's job might be to help a writer "re-see" parts of his work.

When asked if the students understood what the teacher expects when they peer edit, students responded either "yes" or "most of the time." One student responding yes said, "She expects us to look for comma splices, awkward sentences, and other content or sentence structure errors." Only one student implied that she went past surface corrections of the papers she edited. "When I correct a classmate's work, I go beyond merely spelling, punctuation, and other grammar, I look for sentences that sound odd or are empty. I check for proper support of the thesis statement. I think this is what the teacher expects, if not more" (Dannele). Other students mentioned coherence of the essay, order, and clarity as items they felt the teacher wanted them to address.

Students were also asked if they were comfortable making critical comments on a peer's paper. All responded yes. In addition, all of the students said they were not offended by critical comments made on their papers.

Students were asked to give examples of specific types of positive feedback they would give on a piece of peer edited writing. Student comments ranged from telling the peer "I like the story," to "nice use of description," to comments that address the content as "interesting and strong." Only one student described her positive feedback in terms of the types of editing comments she makes on the paper. "I usually suggest using different words, re-arranging a sentence, asking for proof, suggesting a different conclusion" (Dannele).

When asked what types of editing comments were most beneficial to them as writers, students responded punctuation and spelling corrections. Only one student addressed the idea of critical comments that might improve her essay. "The types of editing comments that are most beneficial are critical comments. From these I am able to improve my essay" (Marci).

Teacher Survey:

The teacher survey attempted to ascertain the instructor's goals for peer editing within her classroom. The survey asked the instructor to describe her teaching methods, where she learned to peer edit, and what she felt was the most important aspect of peer editing.

The teacher's goal with peer editing was for students to improve their writing through "identification of strengths and weaknesses in others." This instructor felt peer editing was most beneficial to students in the upper grades, from tenth grade on to college. Students in the lower grades would not benefit from peer editing because they would be unable to use the skills necessary to do the job properly.

This teacher has been using peer editing in her classroom for 14 years. She reports that she became familiar with the concept through various teaching workshops and through reading of materials on the subject, such as Nancy Atwell's In the Middle. She introduces the skill in two class periods directed solely at the idea of peer editing. Following these two lessons, the teaching aspect is continuous. She uses three types of instructional tools to teach the concept: proofreading mark sheets, practice examples, and modeling of proofreading. The most important aspect for quality peer editing, she says, "is students taking their time." When asked what types of editing comments she generally sees on the papers, the teacher responded that "these comments are varied from simple-- such as spelling errors-- to complex, such as main idea of paragraph two is unclear."

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DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The information gathered in this study clearly indicates that students are not making detailed content revisions when involved in peer review groups. The study supports the theory that students are making little more than grammar and punctuation correction.

The vast majority of corrections made on papers are Form corrections. There were no significant differences between the genre of writing samples analyzed for this study. Students seemed comfortable in making Form comments on literary analysis and self selected essays. Students were merely addressing basic mechanics issues. Comma placement and spelling lessons are repeated over and over at the younger grade levels. Students, it can therefore be assumed, have acquired a certain comfort level in making these types of corrections. There appears to be a sense of confidence in making these types of changes during the peer review process.

These Form corrections are important to the writing process, but they do not help the writer "re-see" the piece for the revision process. Form corrections merely help "clean up" the final draft. Most students surveyed indicated that they felt these were the types of corrections the teacher required. One student felt that these types of editing comments were, in fact, the most beneficial part of the peer editing process. Apparently, the teacher had not been clear in her intent for the peer review process. It is interesting to note that on the survey some students mentioned that they felt the teacher wanted them to look at order, coherence, and clarity, but none of these issues were addressed on the papers reviewed. In addition, these types of issues were not detailed on the grade sheet provided for this class. Students assumed Form corrections were the types of corrections the teacher sought, these were the types of corrections they were comfortable making, and these were the types of corrections they focused on. In order for students to move away from this level of thinking, the teacher needs to spend more time teaching and

modeling the peer review process. Students were not capable of making true revision comments based on the lessons provided by this teacher. Although the teacher claims to have been practicing peer reviewing for 14 years, it appears she has yet to truly comprehend the peer reviewing process.

If the teacher taught mini lessons on organization, detail, figurative language, and other writing skills, why were these items missing in the peer review comments? Either she did not clearly teach these ideas or she never made a firm connection between these concepts and their value in the peer review process. The teacher also neglected the opportunity to use additional drafts in the writing process. By limiting the students to only two drafts, the students were forced to focus on the issues most pressing to a final draft, which they obviously felt were corrections in mechanics. At no point in the papers analyzed, were any comments found that would encourage the writer to better organize the piece or use more figurative language. As seniors in an intensive writing program, these students should have a fair command of the terms and their function in writing. Again, this knowledge was not connected to the reviewing process.

The teacher provided no written rubrics for the students reviewing papers. The only guide sheet was the grade sheet she provided. Obviously, students addressed only what was written out on the grade sheet. This sheet emphasized specific mechanics problems: spelling, punctuation, paragraphs, and capitalization. A general category of Content was also graded. The Content category gave no prompts for the reviewer. Students were left on their own to determine what types of comments/corrections would be considered Content revisions. This section of the grade sheet had a value of 40 points, which indicated its importance, but the teacher provided no models or rubrics for the students. As past research indicates, the teacher must stay on task during the peer review sessions. Students must be made aware of rubrics as they are editing the written work.

Past research also indicates that students were uncomfortable making negative comments on a peer's paper. In the survey done for this study, students denied being uncomfortable making negative comments or receiving them. However, students avoided making any judgment comments on papers. Again, the teacher did not specifically ask students to make evaluative comments, but they are a valid part of the Reference category of revision. These types of comments encourage the reader to further analyze and develop certain points of the paper. By not supplying any Reference comments, the reviewers have done little to help the writer re-question any areas of the work. One student surveyed indicated on her survey that she made positive comments such as "good paragraph" or "nice use of description," but these comments were not found on any of the writing samples. In the Ellmann study, he found students resorted to clichés and vague generalizations. Even these types of comments were absent from the work reviewed by the students of this study. Student reviewers offered little meaningful criticism and made no real attempt to help further develop details or better organize the piece of writing. Even Graner's contention that reviewing sessions are reduced to "recitations of mutual compliments" was unsupported by this study. Students made no attempt to praise or criticize in their peer review groups.

To understand the effects of peer review groups in the classroom, the teacher must first understand what he or she hopes to gain from the groups. If the goal is simply collaborative learning, then, as previous studies have indicated, there may be a valid reason for using peer review groups. These groups would focus on the interaction of the peers, not on the ability to help with the revision process.

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CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the greatest variable in this peer review formula was the teacher. In the present study, The instructor's teaching process had a tremendous influence on how the students viewed their role in peer reviewing. The most attention was paid to the categories stressed by the teacher on the grade sheet. In order for these students to have advanced in the peer review process, they needed far more direction and practice in revision strategies. Students also would have benefited from further revision drafts within their writing process.

There remains a need for further research into the role of peer review groups. The effects of teacher directions must be analyzed before one can make any firm conclusions about the role of peer reviewing. A study involving several teachers who use peer groups would add valuable information to the concept of peer reviews. It must be determined whether or not students more thoroughly exposed to revision techniques are capable of making Content and Reference revision comments on their peer's paper.

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