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Peer Review and the Writer's Worksheet

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Peer Review and the Writer's Worksheet

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Overview

There may be no writing classroom activity that garners such intense reactions as peer review. For some, peer review is seen as a positive, enthusiastic experience, one where students gain feedback on their essays that lead to robust revisions and extended development of the student as writer. However, in other cases, student and instructor responses to peer review are more negative, frustrating, and, at times, devastating. These comments frequently depict peer review as a waste of time or, in the direst of situations, as an event that has detrimental effects on writing and writer identity. In a survey of over 1,000 students, Charlotte Brammer and Mary Rees found that most students argued peer review was “not very helpful”; the authors further found “we have much work to do in helping students understand what peer review is (collaborative learning), and, more pointedly, what it isn't (proofreading)” (79). And Linda Fernsten notes the problems that can arise when peer review involves members from different racial and/or cultural backgrounds, writing that “when one's language is substantially different from what is familiar to peer responders or if writers perceive themselves to be socially or culturally distanced from their responding peers, the process can be nightmarish” (38).

For several years, I have heard similar comments from my writing students. As I have encountered these comments, I've noted a consistent trend: the writer's role in helping to generate feedback was almost never addressed. Writers lamented the fact that their peers were frequently not productive or resistant to discussion and hypothesized that if they were with a different group of students or were just allowed to revise on their own, then their writing would be substantially better. It was apparent that writers rarely became or were

encouraged to become an active part of the review session, in essence becoming a background actor during the process. Part of this reason may be due to the writer feeling uncomfortable with or resistance towards becoming more involved. But I also believe this stems from the fact that writers were rarely presented with an opportunity to be more active. Writers were not encouraged to be more involved while peers were reading their texts, nor was there any encouragement to ask questions or seek clarification from reviewers on their comments (written or verbal). Thus, writers were a silent member of peer review; ironically, the person with the most to gain from the situation was the least involved in the activity.

To encourage writers to be more active members of peer review sessions, I incorporated a new activity into the process: The Writer's Worksheet. Unlike previously used peer review worksheets (which asked reviewers to write down responses and did not encourage discussion), the Writer's Worksheet encourages the writer to be the most active member of the session. After a brief overview of the preparation students received for peer review, this article explains this activity and provides examples of the positive transformation in student writing and peer review in my writing classrooms.

Time Commitment

Ideally, two class sessions should be devoted to this activity. One session can be used to introduce students to successful peer review practices, in general, and the Writer's Worksheet. The second session would be for the actual peer review session.

Materials

The only materials necessary for this activity are the students' rough drafts of their assignment and one Writer's Worksheet per student. A model student paper could be used for the mock peer review session during the peer review preparation class session. Additional reading materials on successful peer review practices could also be included;

the works cited and further reading sections at the end of this activity guide provide some possible readings for use.

Activity Process

- Prior to the first peer review, a class session is devoted to preparing students for it. This begins with a discussion of the students' past experiences with peer review. As we discuss these past experiences, I list key terms or past problems mentioned on the front screen. For example, statements about vague comments from reviewers (such as "This is good" or "you have an A here") are common. Students will also mention highly critical comments or reviewers who do not offer any feedback. After these items are listed, we discuss ways to alleviate these types of issues, including suggestions for elaborating on comments or methods for framing criticisms in a useful way.
- Next, I start to address the writer's role during peer review, discussing ways they can be more involved by posing questions to reviewers and seeking clarification on suggestions and revision ideas. I then introduce the Writer's Worksheet (discussed more fully below) during a mock peer review session. For the mock session, I take on the role of the writer of the paper, modeling ways that writers can be more involved. As students answer my questions and offer me suggestions, I model useful strategies such as repeating back suggestions for clarification, asking them questions to help me better understand their advice, or pushing the students to go further with their comments, especially vague ones. Students have remarked that this class session has been very useful. Students enjoy the opportunity to discuss and rework unproductive comments, and most students feel the mock peer review provides them with the opportunity to practice newly learned skills while also offering a chance to see how a

writer can use comments and questions to gain better feedback. The activity serves as a good introduction for students to learn about the Writer's Worksheet.

- During the second class session, when the peer review occurs, students are placed into their peer review groups. Each student is given a copy of the Writer's Worksheet (see Appendix A). Students are encouraged to add their own specific questions to the worksheet while their peers read over their text, ensuring that their concerns and questions are highlighted and hopefully addressed.
- A student volunteers to go first, and the group silently reads their paper. Then, the student writer begins the session, asking the group the questions that are listed on the worksheet. In other words, rather than having reviewers silently write down their answers to the questions, the writer must verbally offer each question to the reviewers and ask for feedback in response. If the writer is not receiving useful feedback or if peers are not clear in their responses, then the writer can ask for clarification or extended information. The writer records these comments and suggestions on her Writer's Worksheet in a way that makes sense and will be useful to her when revising the text while also avoiding having to read and understand confusing peer comments or taking time to decipher difficult handwriting. Before finishing, writers are advised to go back to the start of the worksheet and review their own questions about the text; if those questions have not yet been answered, then the writer can take time to address those issues with the reviewers.
- Finally, using the responses received on the Writer's Worksheet, the writer develops a revision plan. I suggest that writers prioritize their revision needs: What is the most pressing concern for this paper right now? What information

or resources do you need to make these revisions? What concerns you about acting on a specific suggestion? Once completed, each student meets with me briefly before the end of class. Looking over the plans, I offer resources where needed and, when necessary, ask students to take more time to think through their peers' comments and make sure they have identified all the necessary changes needed.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the communal nature of writing
- Practice successful reading and responding practices
- Develop strong revision techniques
- Gain a new perspective of the role of the writer in the response and revision process
- Develop skills in reflection and self-assessment.

Learning Accommodations

- This practice can be accomplished in an online peer review environment. While preference would be for synchronous peer review, asynchronous peer review can occur as long as the writer is provided opportunities to ask follow-up questions of peer reviewers. The Writer's Worksheet could be scanned for only use or perhaps pasted into a communal writing environment, such as a wiki, for the review.
- For writers who are uncomfortable leading the review session, teachers may consider using pairs instead of small groups to increase the level of comfort. Additional sessions for peer review preparation may also help alleviate some of

this uncomfortableness.

- English as a Second Language writers may need additional support when leading the session on their paper. Discussing differences between writings from different cultures could be useful to help the full class prepare for review sessions.

Works Cited

Brammer, Charlotte and Mary Rees. "Peer Review from the Students' Perspective: Invaluable or Invalid?" *Composition Studies*, vol 35, no. 2, 2007, pp. 71-85

Fernsten, Linda. "Peer Response: Helpful Pedagogy or Hellish Event." *WAC Journal*, vol. 17, 2006, pp. 33-41

Further Reading

Dipardo, Anne and Sarah Warshauer Freedman. "Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions." *Review of Educational Research*, vol 58, no. 2, 1988, pp. 119-149.

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Styslinger, Mary. "Mars and Venus in My Classroom: Men Go to their Caves and Women Talk during Peer Revision." *English Journal*, vol. 88, no. 3, 1999, pp. 50-56

Appendix A: Writer's Worksheet

Put your name at the top of this sheet. As your peers read your paper, write down at least two questions you have about your text in the space below.

After your peers have finished reading your paper, ask them the following three questions and write down their answers. Keep in mind the requirements listed on the assignment sheet, and make sure to ask for clarification if you need it:

- What do you feel is the strongest and/or most interesting part of my text?
- Was there anywhere in my text where you were confused or wanted more information?
- What are two suggestions you have to help me make this text stronger?

Assignment Specific Questions (*NOTE: These questions change and are specific to the assignment that is being peer reviewed at the time. The questions below are meant as examples*)

- Have I defined the problem and offered enough background information on it for readers? Is there anything else you would like to know about the topic that I have not provided?
- Have I clearly presented at least two different perspectives on the topic? Have I used my research effectively? Where else do I need evidence to support my argument?
- Have I included a solution or call to action that is realistic and feasible? Are there other solutions/calls that I should consider?

STOP!! Look back at the questions you wrote down at the beginning of the Worksheet. Were all of those questions answered?

If not, talk with your peers about these questions before moving on to the Revision Plan section.

REVISION PLAN

After the peer review session is over, look back over your written notes about your peers' suggestions. Using their comments as a guide, develop a revision plan in the space below. The plan should outline what changes you plan to make to the paper, along with any new questions that have emerged from the peer response session. Please show this revision plan to the instructor before you leave class today.