

2005

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Recommended Citation

McCurrie, M. Kilian (2005) "Peer Review Matters: Creating Effective Peer Review," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1215>

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Peer Review Matters: Creating Effective Peer Review

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Last year at my college's Center for Teaching Excellence while conducting a WAC workshop on designing writing assignments, I was overwhelmed and unprepared for the number of teachers from across disciplines that wanted to know more about creating successful peer review activities. While these teachers had given up their free time to attend this workshop and were demonstrating their commitment to the teaching of writing, they all told stories of their experiences and struggles with seemingly unproductive peer review activities. One teacher questioned whether peer review could really make students' writing "better," and almost all had a type of peer review that they thought worked best. Some teachers argued for placing students in small groups to read and respond to drafts; others claimed the only useful peers reviews were text-based close readings with written comments.

I have also found in students' metacognitive analyses of their writing and responding that while some students described peer response as helpful, others were disappointed because responders often summarized with a trite, "It was good." All of these experiences demonstrate the ways our basic assumptions about writing and learning can influence the choices we make as teachers. I hope that by reviewing some of the basic assumptions about and goals for peer review I can demonstrate how successful peer review activities require that our methods flow from both our writing goals and assumptions about learning.

Peer Review Rooted in Speaking and Listening

While the theoretical roots of peer review can be found in constructivist theories of language, as a practice it pre-dates the development of constructivist theory. As Anne Gere demonstrates, writers have a long history of relying on peers to shape and transform their work through conversation. The talking and listening that was practiced by professional writers seemed to connect well with social theories of language and learning described by scholars like Kenneth Bruffee. In "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" Bruffee argued that "writing of all kinds is internalized social talk made public and social again. If thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized" (400). In other words, "writing always has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation" (400). Peer review became a way to provide students with a way to practice and master the discourse valued by the university. Through this face-to-face peer review Bruffee claimed that students learned to synthesize ideas and offer suggestions for improvement.

Many writing teachers place students in small groups with specific directions for both writers and responders based on the observation-like responses advocated by psychologist Carl Rogers. For example, writers were told not to apologize before they began to read their drafts, and responders were given sentence starters like "What I hear you saying is . . ." As Peter Elbow and others have pointed out, this type of "say-back" can lead responders to engage writers in conversations about specific rhetorical aims and effects. For example, in "Writing Language Acquisition: The Role of Response and the Writing Conference" the research of Gere and Stevens shows how the creative pressure of this face-to-face peer review produces spontaneous, "genuine" response from an audience that helps writers re-envision their writing. The handout I have developed for face-to-face peer review is taken from Peter Elbow and shows one way to organize students so that the emphasis is placed on both speaking and listening. I think most

writing teachers will recognize this activity and the many variations it can take.

Reading + Writing Workshop
(Based on Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*)

In this activity our purpose is not to critique or evaluate.

1. We want the writer to see and hear what the piece of writing communicates to a real audience. We're focusing on our ability to respond to what we hear.
2. Find groups of three or four.
3. The writer reads through the draft once or selects a portion to be read. After a pause, the writer reads the draft once more.
4. The audience listens and keeps notes taking to a minimum.
5. After the writer has finished reading, wait 60 seconds for writer and audience to collect their thoughts. Allow for each person to respond without interrupting.

After everyone has had a chance to respond, general discussion is okay. Some Elbowesque Response Techniques:

1. Point to specific words or phrases, metaphors, sentences or points that caught your attention. List things you remember. Be specific.
2. Summarize (or say back) what seems to be the most important idea or feeling the piece communicates.

Advice to Writer

1. Do not apologize.
2. Do not explain.
3. Be quiet. Really listen to what people say and what is behind what they say.
4. Don't reject what readers tell you, but don't be intimidated by it either.
5. Remember you are always right and always wrong.

Advice to Listener-Responder

1. Listen actively.
2. Give specific reactions to specific parts.
3. React to the writing, not the writer.
4. No kind of reaction is wrong even if it seems odd to you. Say it anyway, even if you can't explain it.
5. If someone has reacted in a similar way to yours, repeat your own anyway. The writer needs to hear the similarities and differences are.
6. Remember you are always right and always wrong.

However effective this form peer review may be, my own students often say that they find it extremely difficult because they do not like reading their pieces aloud to a small group, because they feel as though they will be judged. Despite students' initial hesitation, when students realize that one of the main goals of face-to-face peer review is understanding and not judging, they grow more comfortable. They also report that besides getting the reactions of an audience, they also found it valuable to read their draft aloud because they could "hear" when and where their writing wasn't quite "right." Even if they practiced reading aloud as they drafted their piece, reading before a small audience focused them in productive ways.

Another important aspect of this type of peer response is the embodied type of responses writers receive. In their meta-analyses writers often comment not just on the words of their responders, but also on the gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, and overall body language of their responders. For the last year I've taught at a college specializing in the visual and performing arts, and I have found that my students are even more highly attuned to both the presence and aura of these exchanges than students at other institutions I have taught. At the end of this peer revision activity I ask students to share with the class one thing they plan to work as they revise their draft, and often students will not only use what a group member has said, but they also comment on how the body language and vibe they get from their group may lead to revisions. They may see someone in their group squint or move back in their seat, or they may take note of their feelings as someone reacts to their draft. They are able to interpret all these reactions and often foreshadow what their group members will say.

Face-to-face forms of peer review based on oral communication and constructivist theories take many shapes and forms besides the example I provide based on Peter Elbow's work. Teachers have altered, extended, and focused this practice in many ways. The description I offer here is, of course, oversimplified. There exist many permutations of this basic method that preserve the oral qualities of

speaking and listening as well as the synchronicity of time and place so important to face-to-face peer review. Operating from these assumptions about oral theories of language and learning, some teachers have even had students complete peer review activities that preserve the oral quality of the response but alter other parts of the process. Patricia Dunn describes an activity in *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing* that asks students to use voice mail to deliver a response. While Dunn was not asking her students to respond to other students' writing, her activity certainly could accommodate that goal. The comment features available on many word processing programs now also have the ability to record voice comments so that peer review retains some the oral quality of response but changes other elements of the interaction to accommodate different learning styles. First, students exchange written texts without reading their text aloud. Second, the time for the response is extended so that students have more time to read a classmate's draft and formulate a response. Recording voice comments also offers some permanence since the response is captured on voice mail or saved with word processing comment features. Overall, this experience would be quite different, and even though Dunn emphasizes learning styles, the activity she describes grows out of the assumption that talking is an essential element of learning to write.

But when are face-to-face practices most beneficial to writers? There can be no doubt of the value of conversation throughout the writing process, but when might writers find it most helpful and when might it meet our goals for the class? Since writers in the early stages of their drafting generally have less commitment to closure, traditional forms of face-to-face peer review may be most beneficial to these writers. First drafts or discovery drafts may be more open to the global revision often engendered through face-to-face peer response. Early on in our writing, other voices can give us the confidence to extend ideas, take risks, and formulate or re-formulate our purposes and construction of audience. If our goal for organizing a peer review activity is to assist

students with these broader questions, then the strategic value of this type of peer review is in its immediate opportunity for interaction and feedback for global revision. Even if students are approaching closure with a draft, orally based peer response can still be of value.

Students coming to closure in their writing might not want to hear, "After listening to your first five sentences, I was expecting a narrative not an exposition." They might want to hear, "I wondered why you ordered your examples in that way. I was really expecting that you would end with your third example, which I thought was the strongest." The first response would be a reaction that could lead to global revisions in the way a paper is organized or developed while the second response is specific and something the author could choose to address as she moved toward closure. When we think more critically about the types of response generated through face-to-face peer review, we can better match them to the needs of the writers in our classes.

Peer Review Rooted in Close Reading

While peer review may have its roots in oral theories of communication, a strong text tradition has always been valued by teachers who maintain that a focus on close readings of texts provides more specific opportunities for critically intervening in students' writing than face-to-face methods. As Walter Ong controversially concluded in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, "Orally managed language and thought is not noted for analytic precision" (104). Even Bruffee and Gere, who both stress the value in the spontaneous, oral quality of face-to-face peer review, strongly adhere to the use of writing as part of peer review (402 + 95). Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg have also argued that, "writing is not prior to speech – not historically, of course, but conceptually, in that writing shows more clearly than speech does how language is different from what it supposedly represents" ("Jacques Derrida" *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* 1166). They conclude that because writing is a way of mediating our interactions with our world,

unlike talk or conversation, written texts can become a means of transformation. Writing is, therefore, more integral to learning than speech. English departments have a long history of reverence for the written word and its uses in teaching and interpreting the world. Composition emerged from this institutional culture and has been professionally invested in asserting the primacy of written language.

Peer review focused on text also differs from face-to-face methods by altering both the space and time of response. Separating the writer and responder and giving more time to formulate a response produces a peer review that many think is more objective since it detaches text from author and all other human contexts. Text-based peer review has become even more common as we move increasingly to online environments for our interactions. Peer reviews organized to reflect these values often ask students to exchange written copies of their drafts and formulate a response, usually following a response guide provided by the teacher. Some teachers even try to maintain some anonymity for writers and responders in the belief that this makes the practice of peer review more objective. This kind of “blind review,” also practiced by many professional journals, ensures that close attention is paid to the text itself and not its context. A New Critical (close reading) approach to peer review can provide full, rich and deep readings of student texts that can address all the ways that meaning coheres within a text.

**A Late Term Peer Response:
Close Reading (Creating by Doug Hesse)**

By this point in the semester, you should have learned a few things about giving and using feedback to work in progress. Please use today’s class to read a draft from at least one other person and write a response to that author. Your response should be addressed to the writer, and should be in the form of a memo (i.e. To: + From) Please wordprocess your comments and print two copies. Give one copy to the writer, and give the second one to a designated classmate, who will give the set to the instructor.

Use the computer to address, as fully as you can, the following questions.

1. Read the first page of the paper but no further. What do you expect will happen in the rest of the paper? What will this paper need to accomplish in order for the writer to achieve his or her goal?
2. Still without reading beyond the first page, describe your response to the paper’s topic. How interested are you in the topic? What is the source of your interest, or why doesn’t it appeal to you? Please note that this question simply asks you to describe your interest to the writer, not judge whether he or she is doing a good job.
3. Now read the rest of the paper. What seemed to be the author’s main purpose in writing this paper? In other words, what might the writer hope readers do as a result of reading this paper?
4. What seemed to be the audience that the author intended to reach? What does the audience already know or believe about the topic? How would they respond to the paper? For example, would they be surprised at learning new things? Skeptical? Hostile? Smug or bored at already knowing things? Reaffirmed?
5. Describe your sense of the author by comparing him or her to someone else, then explaining the comparison. For example, The author of this paper sounds like Newt Gingrich, or the author of this paper sounds like Tom Brokaw, or the author of this paper sounds like my best friend or Fox Mulder or so on.
6. Identify one part of this paper that would best benefit from additional explanation, analysis, examples, or expansion. This might be a particular sentence or paragraph or idea, and the reason for this expansion could be to make the paper more clear, more convincing, or more interesting. You might even think the paper is fine. No matter. Suppose you’re forced to identify part of paper for this reason. Explain what the writer might develop further and why.
7. Suppose that severe space limitations meant that a chunk of the paper had to be removed, at least a few sentences. What part of this paper can best go and why?
8. Anything you’d like to tell the author?

As the example from Doug Hesse shows, these forms of peer review focus students on specific ways of reading texts. Just as face-to-face peer response can take many forms with variation in space, time and interactions, text-based peer response can also be organized with similar variations. One of the growing trends is to use online media as a platform for peer response. In *Virtual Peer Review* Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch illustrates the challenges and opportunities we will encounter in practicing virtual peer response.

One of the major challenges Kastman Breuch describes is defining more clearly what constitutes collaboration. In face-to-face peer review collaboration is limited, but in virtual environments collaboration can be extended to peer editing, collaborative thinking and even the co-authoring of texts. Because technology makes possible incorporating in part or whole the writing of others, this must raise questions of ownership and authorship in ways that are not always necessary in face-to-face peer response or traditional close readings. In her examination of editing, for example, she identifies a possible problem with the use of some word-processing tools that simply allow students to edit text without preserving the original text. Approaching editing in this way makes it difficult for writers to retain ownership of their text, and it also diminishes the ability of writers to learn how to correct their own mistakes.

Teachers could consider asking reviewers to write comments about the errors instead of directly intervening and altering the text, but this practice also assumes that reviewers can or should be able to explain why something in the text may need to be edited without considering all those students who might read a text and know something sounds incorrect or looks incorrect, but they can not explain why.

Collaboration can even become more difficult to negotiate when we consider the ways it can blur authorship and ownership. Kastman Breuch and others assert that the goal of virtual peer review is primarily to respond to writing and offer

suggestion for improving the text, and this goal means that collaborative interactions are more limited for virtual peer reviewers than for collaborative writers. In some cases, however, virtual peer response might be more productive and a better learning experience if writers were to decide for themselves how they would use the technology - to collaborate or suggest. Could writers define this space for themselves and still meet the goals of the class they were writing for?

Besides considering these challenges, attempts to use technology must also confront the “frustration factor” that often complicates its use. Even when care has been taken to select the appropriate technology, sometimes teachers are faced the problems of inaccessibility, incompatibility, and lack of technical support. By considering first what the goal of a specific peer review might be and then matching that goal with an appropriate technology, teachers can incorporate technology in their courses in useful ways.

Bringing Together Oral and Text-based Response

In *Literacy as Involvement* Deborah Brandt’s “writing as involvement” demonstrates that an active view of written communication can facilitate a more holistic view of peer response that does not polarize oral approaches and text-based approaches. The contextual, human activities of reading and writing are always intersubjective, according to Brandt, and can never be simply regarded as products that are “autonomous, anonymous, and textual” (*Literacy as Involvement* 23). Brandt resists the notions of “strong-text” literacy because it attempts to detach text from author, ignoring context, and recasting essentially human interactions as purely textual ones. Because of its characterization as being less-than-human, some writing teachers have criticized text based peer response and course activities that occur online. Brandt reminds us, however, that writing and reading are just as active and contextual as speaking since both have as their premise a social exchange. Brandt’s argument revises text-based peer reviews to depict them as a literacy of involvement rather than removal, a theory that can broaden normal discourse

to include written communication and collapse the hierarchies that have existed in discussions of speech and writing. As a literacy of involvement, text-based peer review can be viewed as an engaging human activity rather than a disengaged, atomizing practice.

Both the critical thinking and autonomy necessary for making and negotiating these choices requires a kind of flexibility on the part of teachers who always foreground our writing goals in the process of selecting the appropriate methods and technological tools. These choices must be informed by both a theory and practice that is highly reflexive. Our choices also require a technological literacy that includes not just the ability to operate in computer mediated environments, but also the ability to think critically about the creation, contexts, and uses of this media. Flexibility is dependent upon and results from our theoretical and pedagogical reflection as well as our technological literacy.

When I think of organizing a peer review activity, I must first assess what my goals are. Once I know what my goals are I can consider the kind of activity that will best meet my goal. The chart of goals, activities and rationales is not exhaustive, but it could serve as starting point for considering the different ways peer response can best support student learning.

Teachers could also find ways to combine activities in ways that respond to student needs. For example, students may begin a response activity online and extend it through a classroom activity that emphasizes conversation. By reviewing some of the origins of peer review in oral and text-based theories and by describing some of the ways I have organized peer review, I hope teachers can use some of these ideas to create their own activities. In showing how the goals of peer review should determine the method, I also want to encourage teachers to match their goals for peer review to the methods they select. Teachers should not feel bound to one peer review activity that occurs in one time, in one place, following one set of guidelines. We should be able to offer our students a variety of approaches to peer review that demonstrate how different methods can

work together to enhance the effectiveness of peer review.

Beyond organizing our students' peer response experiences, my larger goal is to recognize the different learning styles in my class and enable students to select the form of peer response that will work best for them. In my own classes I plan several different peer review activities, but I also leave space in the course for students to choose activities that match best with the ways they learn. By matching goals with appropriate methods and by allowing students to select the activities that work for them, we achieve the kind of flexibility in our approach to peer review that makes it part of an overall literacy of involvement. I encourage all teachers to take a deeper look at the practices of peer review so that writers can take control of their own writing and learning through the strategic use of our human, textual and technological resources.

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