

CHAPTER 10.

LEARNING FROM PEER REVIEW ONLINE: CHANGING THE PEDAGOGICAL EMPHASIS

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Peer review has been a foundational practice in writing studies for decades, beginning with those teacher/scholars (Elbow; Murray; Moffett; Bruffee) in the process movement, who early on encouraged its use. To date, it is a practice that can be found in almost all first-year college writing classes and increasingly in upper-level writing courses. Though a widely accepted practice, it nonetheless has its detractors who question the validity of the practice overall and who specifically question the ability of students to write an effective peer review that would help a peer to revise an essay (Jesnek; Flynn).

Many teacher/instructors in writing studies too often tend to view peer review as an activity primarily focused on outcomes, one focused on the peer reviewer's ability to provide sound advice in a revision of a peer's essay. In a typical peer review workshop, instructors set up group sessions charging students to review the final drafts of an essay. Unfortunately, when instructors see the comments that peer reviewers have given, they are often dismayed with the results as the comments rarely live up to their expectations of what is needed in the revision process. In effect, they view student comments based on the response that an instructor would have given and when the peer review does not live up to that standard, they think that peer review workshop has not achieved its intended goal—the ability of a peer review to analyze and comment effectively on a paper draft. Acting as a proxy to the teacher, we hope our students will create a similar model of response that might mirror what we had to say about a given paper, even though most of us have spent years responding to student papers. When students are unable to replicate this response model, we throw up our hands in despair and disparage the peer review process.

This chapter proposes to reframe the practice of peer review to think about it in terms of what students can *learn* from the process of peer review rather than a focus on the outcomes. Too often, instructors judge a student's peer review comments solely on their effectiveness to communicate ways to improve a peer's

essay. What goes unexamined is the learning that occurs for the peer reviewer in providing comments. In the following discussion, I examine the ongoing debate about peer review in writing studies, looking at perspectives from both instructors and students. Then, I review research in the field of education that studies what students *learn* by providing comments to their peers. This research offers writing studies instructors an alternative way to think about peer review, what I call a change in pedagogical emphasis. Finally, I provide an example of online peer review that enacts this change in pedagogical emphasis: one that shifts the focus from the student acting as a proxy for the instructor to one that examines how a student can learn about the writing process when engaging in peer review. Such a reorientation helps to reduce the expectations that instructors tend to have about a student's ability to write a substantive peer review and refocuses it on the learning that can take place for students.

THE ONGOING DEBATE ABOUT PEER REVIEW

Peer review is an accepted practice in most composition classrooms and has been since the 1960s and 1970s. Early practitioners like composition scholars Kenneth Bruffee and Peter Elbow saw great potential for students in the adoption of peer review practices. For both, the importance of peer review was a de-emphasis of the role of the instructor and a move toward an emphasis on a student audience for their work. During this time, the sharing of writing with peers accordingly gained traction for both its ability to place students in a "communicative transaction" (Elbow 24) and for its possibilities toward a practice in "collaborative learning" (Bruffee).

In his book *Writing Without Teachers* published in 1973, Peter Elbow recognized the significance of expanding one's audience beyond the instructor to include other students in the class. As such, Elbow had a specific goal in mind: "that it would be better if the student could get the experience of more than one reader. He would get a wider range of reactions to offset the one sidedness of a single reaction" (121). Addressing students, Elbow pointed out that feedback from classmates ultimately works to help them to achieve what they want in their writing and not necessarily the goals of the instructor. The intention of peer review in its early incarnation was not about accomplishing specific quantifiable outcomes, i.e., how substantial was the written peer review comment helping the writer to improve the text. Instead, it was meant for the writer to get the reader's honest reactions to the text.

Early practitioners of peer-response groups did see appreciable benefits to peer review. In her article "Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups (1992), Muriel Harris elucidates the important attributes of peer response that

process-oriented pedagogues noted in their classes: for Ann Ruggles Gere and Robert Abbott this amounted to “improving critical thinking, organization, and appropriateness of writing; improving usage; increasing the amount of revision; and reducing apprehension” (371-372). For Carol Berkenkotter peer response assured “the experience of writing and revising for less threatening audiences than the teacher, of learning to discriminate between useful and non-useful feedback, and of learning to use awareness of anticipated audience responses as writers revise” and finally for Karen Spear peer response meant “contribut[ing] to the evolution of ideas, mak[ing] the audience real, and sharing drafts to help share and test thought” (371-372). In those early decades of peer review, as Harris makes clear, practitioners viewed the practice in favorable terms focusing on larger educational outcomes.

Though peer review continues to be practiced in most composition writing courses and increasingly in literature courses, there are those instructors who question the effectiveness of the practice. Too often, in a first-year writing course, peer review tends to be done as a rote exercise whereby instructors put students into small groups and hand out a rubric or a document of pre-assigned questions to be filled in and answered by the peer reviewer. Sometimes there is time left over for questions and answers among the group participants, but too often students see the activity as an assignment to be done quickly to allow for some social networking before the class ends. Not surprisingly, instructors and students alike wonder about the effectiveness of such an exercise where the emphasis primarily is on the product and not the process. Both groups see peer review as a way to offer specific advice to revise an essay draft. When peer review falls short of both teacher and student expectations (the advice from the peer reviewer proves not helpful to revising), then both are apt to question its usefulness.

In an early article, “Students as Readers of their Classmates’ Writing: Some Implications for Peer Critiquing” (1984), critic Elizabeth Flynn started to question the value of the peer review workshop. She found that the enthusiasm for peer review that Bruffee, Elbow, Moffett and others espoused was “often not backed up by empirical evidence” (qtd in “Re-viewing Peer Review”). Using her own first-year students as an example, Flynn noted that they weren’t giving “very useful feedback” to their peers but tended to focus on surface-level issues rather than on larger order issues like organization, etc. From her anecdotal evidence, Flynn thus recommended that students needed more guidance from teachers in order to produce an “effective” peer review, one that would give more substantive advice. Her suggestion was to use “critique sheets,” with the charge “to point out gaps, inconsistencies, and irrelevancies.”

In a follow-up article, “Re-viewing Peer Review” (2011), Flynn explains that not much has changed in the ensuing years since the publication of her initial

article. Though she continues to use critique sheets in her writing classes, Flynn remains doubtful of the effectiveness of peer review for students and notes that only occasionally do students remark that peer comments have helped them with their writing. Not ready to give up on peer critique entirely, Flynn concludes that it appears to be more beneficial for upper-level students who in her estimation are more capable of offering solutions and of making the necessary revisions from a peer's comments.

Similarly, in another 2011 article, "Peer Editing in the 21st Century College Classroom: Do Beginning Composition Students Truly Reap the Benefits?" critic Lindsey M. Jesnek comes right out to suggest "that peer editing may, in fact, be more detrimental than previously imagined" (17). In surveying quantitative and qualitative research on the topic, she found a great deal of dissatisfaction among both first-year composition students and faculty with peer editing. As she makes clear, both students and teachers assume that the purpose of peer editing is "to help with the revision of student drafts" (20). Students expected that peer editing would help them to find errors in their drafts with the eventual purpose of improving their grades (20). When the peer editing session falls short of its goal to offer advice to improve the essay draft, then its benefits are called into question. Ultimately, like Flynn, Jesnek concludes that peer editing is probably better suited for upper-level students.

Instructors are not the only ones to question the usefulness of peer review. In their article, "Peer Review from the Students' Perspective: Invaluable or Invalid," Charlotte Brammer and Mary Rees examine how students perceive the practice. From their study, they noted that most students find peer review "not very helpful" (75). Brammer and Rees found that students thought the primary function of peer review should be to help them catch proofreading errors (79). Coming from different writing backgrounds, some students expressed concern about the quality of feedback given to them if they perceived the writer to have weak writing skills (80). In their concluding remarks, the authors noted that more work needed to be done to address a student's understanding of the importance of peer review. Too often students tend to see peer review merely as an exercise in proofreading and fail to grasp what they can learn when working collaboratively.

In the examples above, the failure of peer review to achieve the desired goal of improving students' essays is reason for both instructors and students to question its usefulness. The main issue at stake for faculty is the perceived inability of students to provide substantive comments on drafts of student essays—a question of outcomes. Whereas, for many students the value of peer review resides in noting proofreading errors. At first glance, the goals of the students and the faculty would appear to be at odds with one another. However, students and instructors do seem to share a common concern: how to improve an essay draft.

In both cases, instructors and students fall victim to what Timothy Oleksiak in a 2020 article evocatively calls the “the improvement imperative” (306). Accordingly, when different peer review techniques fail to produce the desired outcomes, whereby a student’s essay draft does *not* improve because of a peer’s comments, writing instructors are quick to question the value of the practice. Nonetheless, since peer review is considered a foundational part of almost all writing classes, instructors carry on, hoping to find alternative techniques that will eventually achieve better results. Doing so, Oleksiak argues persuasively, just takes instructors down a rabbit hole seeking an unattainable goal. To continue to think of peer review exclusively in terms of the improvement imperative will not bring about the desired results of improved student writing.

In this chapter, I argue that instructors in writing studies typically have been too focused on the improvement imperative—a student’s ability to write a concise peer review that improves a peer’s revision—to the exclusion of what students can learn from the process of providing a peer review. Writing instructors need to rethink their pedagogical emphasis from one focused on the improvement imperative to one that recognizes the learning that can take place for a student providing a peer review. The real value of peer review is not in its outcomes, i.e., the comments to improve a peer’s essay but what students learn by engaging in the process of peer review itself. The online environment, I will demonstrate, further augments this pedagogical shift from product to process.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON PROVIDING PEER REVIEW FEEDBACK

In her 2011 article, “Re-viewing Peer Review,” Elizabeth Flynn noted a decline of published research about peer review in the field of writing studies—a trend beginning in the 1990s. Recent research about peer review, Flynn discovered has moved into a new direction, primarily concerned with L2 learners and with the use of computer-assisted peer review. It is difficult to speculate the reason for the decline in publications that Flynn mentions. It could be that new pedagogies in writing studies, for example, writing about writing and teaching for transfer, consider peer review a minor subset of the writing process and thus of a lesser concern. Nonetheless, peer review remains a mainstay in most writing courses, one that continues to offer challenges to many writing instructors and thus worthy of attention.

To that end in this section, I will re-direct attention to some of the scholarship on peer review that has come out of the education field. Interestingly, though teacher/scholars in composition studies often question the benefit of peer review, those working in the field of education tend toward a more positive

view of the practice. These researchers begin with the premise that peer review in general is worthwhile to advance student learning about writing. While they acknowledge that the “research evidence on the impact of peer groups on writing quality is mixed,” education researchers nonetheless agree that peer review/peer response/peer groups perform an important role in the teaching of writing (Pritchard & Morrow 89). They note the practice of peer review provides students with specific benefits including a sense of audience awareness; the ability to see “their own strengths and weaknesses” as a writer; and an enhanced understanding of the importance of collaborative learning; and the development of a sense of ownership of their writing (Tsui and Ng 147).

The premise that students can learn from providing a peer review is an important one (Zhang 698). To continue to look at peer review in terms of its improvement imperative will, as Oleksiak explains, only lead instructors in a never-ending search for other techniques that ultimately result in the same conclusion—dissatisfaction with student commenting to improve an essay draft. Looking at peer review from the perspective of what a student can learn offers teachers and students a productive way to reaffirm its importance as a meaningful part of the writing process.

In the following brief review, I highlight some of the research that has been done in the education field. While other writing studies scholars also mention the benefits that can accrue for students from providing a peer review (Reid) or what Melissa Meeks evocatively calls “giver’s gain, research scholars in the education field including those doing L2 research have conducted quantitative and qualitative studies that specifically examine what students can learn from doing so.

In an early article (2006) Ngar-Fun Liu and David Carless examine both peer assessment and peer feedback. What is notable, for my purposes, is their research on peer feedback. Liu and Carless highlight the importance of peer feedback and its “potential for enhanced student learning” (279). According to the authors, one way students learn is through their ability to express and articulate what they understand to other students (281). Peer feedback, they suggest, provides the opportunity to practice a student’s self-expression, moving their learning from the “private domain” into the “public domain” with their peers (281). The results of their study suggest that through the practice of peer feedback, students develop specific skills, including “critical reflection, listening to and acting on feedback, sensitively assessing and providing feedback on the work of others” (289). In their final assessment of peer feedback, the authors underscore the importance of cultivating peer feedback as an essential part of the learning process, a point, I would argue, that too often gets overlooked by compositionists (288).

Similarly, Kristi Lundstrom and Wendy Baker, in their article (2009), “To Give is Better Than to Receive: The Benefits of Peer Review to the Reviewers’ Own Writing,” looked specifically at L2 students in their research on peer review. The authors found that those students giving peer reviews “made more significant gains in their own writing over the course of the semester than [those students] who focused on how to use feedback” (30). At the end of their study, they observed two significant results: peer reviewers who were less proficient writers actually “made more gains than those at higher proficiency levels,” and were better able to focus more on global issues in their writing than previously observed (30).

From their findings, Lundstrom and Baker contend that “L2 writer students can improve their own writing by transferring abilities they learn when reviewing peer texts” (38). In effect, engaging in the cognitive processes necessary to give a peer review, student reviewers “learn from these activities to critically self-evaluate their own writing in order to make appropriate revisions” (38). As a result, the authors observed that a student’s capability to give a peer review positively corresponded to their own writing improvement. Their research suggests that for L2 students, and frankly for all students learning to write, they are engaged in more active individual learning about the process of writing through giving peer feedback.

The goal for researchers Young Hoan Cho and Kwangsu Cho in their 2010 article, “Peer Reviewers Learn from Giving Comments,” was to look at how giving comments could improve a reviewer’s own writing skills (630). Beginning with “the learning-writing-by-reviewing hypothesis,” (630) they looked at both the reviewer’s comments and the reception of the comments. In their findings, their study supported their initial hypothesis. They found that student reviewers in general did improve their writing by providing comments especially those comments that focused “at the meaning-level rather than the surface-level” (640). Most important their study revealed that students benefitted more from providing comments and less so from getting peer feedback (640).

Using the same “learning-writing-by-reviewing hypothesis” in a study conducted in 2011, researchers Kwangsu Cho and Charles MacArthur examine the ways that peer review can function as a learning activity and in turn help with the development of the peer reviewer’s own writing (74). Their research identified a number of important takeaways for the practice of peer review. First, students came away with a better understanding of audience and audience awareness. Of greater significance, students had the opportunity “to practice problem-solving strategies important for writing improvement” (75) to include “detecting problems, diagnosing them, and generating solutions” (75, 78). These problem-solving strategies relate directly to a higher level of cognitive processes. Practice of

these strategies, the authors conclude, can help students with their own writing. By providing commentary to writers, the peer reviewers have had to figure out problems in an essay and then have had to effectively explain to the writer how to go about solving those problems—all skills connected to cognition. At the conclusion of their study, the authors found that the active engagement of giving a peer review showed “considerable promise as an effective and efficient way to help college students develop their writing skills” (79).

David Nicol, Avril Thomson, and Caroline Breslin’s study “Rethinking Feedback Practices in Higher Education: A Peer Review Perspective” replicates much of the findings of previous research. For their study, the researchers were interested in how students can learn from receiving peer feedback, feedback production, and “the cognitive processes that are activated when students construct feedback reviews” (102). For the purposes of this literature review, I want to focus on what the students in the study had to say about producing peer reviews. In their comments, half of the students in the study’s survey remarked that they “learned how to think critically or how to make critical judgements” (111) and a majority noted that providing a peer review enabled them to rethink their own work. This study concluded that providing peer reviews “engages students actively in critical thinking, in applying criteria, in reflection, and through this, in learning transfer” (116).

In a 2015 *Instructional Science* article, “Understanding the Benefits of Providing Peer Feedback: How Students Respond to Peers’ Texts of Varying Quality” cognitive psychology researchers Melissa M. Patchen and Christian D. Schunn (2015) reached similar conclusions. From their literature review of articles pertaining to peer feedback, they concluded that “constructing comments appears to be the most effective evaluation activity” (593) in peer review and that “the construction of criticism comments was positively related to student performance” (595). Their study began with the premise that in doing peer review, students necessarily had to engage a certain skill set: the ability to identify problems, troubleshoot them, and offer solutions (607). With practice they noted that students could strengthen those skills suggesting that they were learning in the process. Patchen and Schunn’s research confirms the cognitive benefit for students who practice peer reviewing.

Looking at the research of peer feedback from an online perspective, Esther van Popta et al. (2017) in “Exploring the Value of Peer Feedback in Online Learning,” undertake an extensive meta-analysis literature review analyzing studies that pertain specifically to research related to online peer feedback. Popta et al. argue that too much emphasis in the research on peer review revolves around an examination of the feedback that students receive rather than what students gain from giving feedback. Their study aims to flip that equation to understand what “learning benefits” accrue to the provider.

Focusing on how online peer feedback functions “as a learning activity”, the researchers ended up with a much smaller sampling of journal articles—eight in total. In their analysis, they considered two factors: (1) the learning benefits that accrue from providing online feedback and (2) the cognitive processes involved in the activity of providing online feedback. Their research on peer review showed a distinct benefit specifically related to cognition. As they explain, by providing a peer review online, students engage in a number of cognitive processes: “[they] compare and question ideas; evaluate; suggest modifications; and reflect, plan, and regulate their own thinking. They think critically, connect to new knowledge, explain, and take different perspectives” (29). Their conclusions for online peer review support the claim that students benefit cognitively when providing peer feedback.

As research in the field of education demonstrates, students can learn from the process of analyzing a peer’s essay and from providing comments. Their research comments directly on the numerous benefits that accrue for students who give peer reviews to include practicing self-expression (Liu and Carless); learning to self-evaluate their own writing (Lundstrom and Baker); and engaging in problem-solving strategies (Cho and MacArthur). By providing feedback to others, students are involved in more active learning. Too often the recipient of peer feedback does not understand the information given since it is another person’s reading or misreading of a draft essay or it is helpful information that they are not yet ready to receive. Students learning through a process of their own discovery, I would argue, have a greater chance of adding and possibly transferring such information to their own writing.

These educational studies on peer review suggest that perhaps we as writing instructors have been too focused on peer review outcomes, specifically to the quality of feedback. Instead, they signal an important shift, one that values the learning that takes place for students when providing a peer review. It is a move away from an emphasis on the effectiveness of a student’s comments for revision purposes that frequently leaves both teachers and students dissatisfied to one that proffers an alternative way for writing instructors to think about the goal of peer review—the learning that takes place in providing a comment. In so doing, it offers an opportunity to revitalize practice that is central to writing courses.

Critical to rethinking a change in pedagogical emphasis entails moving peer review online, even for those courses that are taught face to face. Such a move lends itself to engaging students in a manner that more effectively promotes their own critical thinking as they suddenly have more time to read and write at their own pace. It encourages them to reflect on their own ideas and thoughts and to gain practice articulating their ideas—in writing—to their peer group. Moreover, the online environment offers students more of an opportunity to

collaborate and correspond with each other over a period extending the work on peer review that is typically relegated to one class period. As a result of reading, writing, and responding to each other's work online, students are in effect building spontaneous discourse communities and learning how to work together. For these reasons, I have found that doing peer review online moves students productively from a practice that too often is viewed as busy work and done in a hasty manner to one that allows the student more time to think and to process their thoughts away from the distractions that are inherent in a classroom environment. As a result, their commenting and responding to each other tends to be more thoughtful and shows a distinct level of engagement.

In this next section, I will explain how I have developed my writing-intensive course over time to embrace this shift in pedagogical emphasis that attempts to move the goal post from a focus on product to one on process—a consideration of what students can learn by doing peer review. For my purposes, peer review is a practice that necessarily takes place throughout the entire semester. It begins by scaffolding low-stakes writing assignments that eventually lead up to three different sessions of the peer review workshop. In these low-stakes writing assignments, students read, analyze, and comment on each other's responses. By doing so the entire semester, students learn to feel at ease communicating and collaborating in a community of other writers.

SCAFFOLDING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

To frame this discussion, I want to talk about what students do in preparation leading up to the online peer review workshop. I begin by scaffolding shorter writing assignments to enable students to become more comfortable with reading and responding. The initial scaffolding assignment consists of two distinct steps: students write and post to the discussion board (DB). My classes use Blackboard as the Course Management System. Afterwards, they respond to at least two DB posts. These two steps are important because they begin to initiate students into a conversation online with others, thereby helping to develop a writing community where students read and share information.

Let me begin by describing the online class that I teach regularly. It is a portal class, *Methods of Literary Criticism*, for the English major, typically taken when a student is a sophomore. Because it fulfills a writing intensive requirement at my university and because it is offered online, appealing to those students who work, this course also attracts students from other majors, running the gamut from early childhood education to finance and marketing. Most of these students have had limited experience in writing courses other than the required first-year writing courses. To prepare this diverse group of students to participate

as a community of writers, I begin with low-stakes writing assignments that eventually lead up to the peer review writing workshop.

STEP ONE: POSTING ON THE DISCUSSION BOARD

Students are required to write a 250-word post to one of the writing prompts that I have posted on Discussion Board (DB) about the reading for that week. Twice a week, I post writing prompt questions. I typically post three to four questions so that students get to choose whatever topic might be of interest them. These twice-weekly discussion board posts serve to get them to think more concretely about the course readings for that week.

STEP TWO: RESPONDING TO THE DISCUSSION BOARD POST

After they have posted their posts, students are responsible to go back into the DB to comment on two other student posts in the DB thread. They have the option of responding to others in the thread the day they post their responses, or they can go back the next day and write a response. Having students respond to each other on the discussion board begins the process of engaging them in a conversation with the group. It enables them to see how others have written to a prompt. In addition, it gives them the opportunity to reflect not only on *what* the student had to say about the topic but also *how* the person drafted the response to a topic with which they are familiar. Such an exercise begins to move them toward an engagement with the peer review process. They have had to read carefully, think about what they have read, and then consider how they will respond to their audience. As researchers and students have noted, the online environment in particular gives students the added advantage of spending more time thinking and reflecting before they undertake writing and responding to their peers (Pritchard and Morrow; Jensen).

In reading the DB posts, students can see how others in the class have responded to the questions I have posted for the DB thread. For many, these DB posts allow students to see different interpretations to the assigned reading, ones they had not considered. In that way, the DB post opens a door to new ideas. For others, the posts clarify issues in the readings that they missed or did not understand. Finally, reading the DB posts enables students to see how others have written up their response and what they have learned about writing from doing so. It can be as simple as noting that a student has used quotes or added examples to support a point.

I am going to quote from just a few student examples to show the ways that students respond to each other's posts even before they are asked to write a peer

review. These responses show they are already reading and thinking critically in their communication with each other. The original writing prompt asked students to respond to Junot Díaz’s short story, “Edison, New Jersey,” focusing on issues of social class.

Example 1: I was surprised to read the “sex slave” and “mail order bride” angle so explicitly stated here, but I can see where your argument is coming from. Being that Yunior is a complete stranger to the maid, besides them both being from the Dominican Republic, it shows her desperation to leave Pruitt when she tells him “I want to get out of here . . . I’ll pay you for a ride” (Diaz 133). The quotations you present about her amount of clothing versus the amount of Pruitt’s belongings also demonstrate the possibility of her being abused. Yunior gets the urge to “ask her if she loves her boss” but refrains from doing so (Diaz 137). The balance of power in a boss-employee relationship would certainly be complicated if the maid was being “held” to work for Pruitt because of her lack of other options, as you suggest.

In this first example, the reader seems surprised to encounter a different way of thinking about the maid in Díaz’s story—that she might be a “sex slave” and “mail order bride.” The reader also goes on to remark on the writing strategies that the writer has deployed: an awareness that the writer is making an argument and that the writer used direct quotations to support points. Finally, the reader also takes the information they read in the response and draws their own conclusion—“the balance of power in a boss-employee relationship would certainly be complicated”—basically underscoring the writer’s comments. This response shows the student critically engaged through analyzing and thinking through the writer’s DB post—an important preparatory step for the practice of peer review.

Example 2: I enjoyed reading your thoughts on this discussion board post and thought you came up with some good examples from the text to help support your ideas. I liked how you wrote “Yunior enjoys being able to buy his girlfriend items but, this is a luxury that he cannot completely afford; stealing makes Yunior feel as if he is rich though.” Yunior wants more for himself but I kind of got the sense that he feels that this is the life that’s laid out for him and it was going to stay like that forever. I liked that he took out the calculator to work towards his own pool table, it shows that it is a luxury he really wants and is working towards.

For this second example, the reader clearly is impressed with what they have read from the DB post. They also note the importance of using “good examples” when trying to support an argument. It is interesting that the student goes back to the DB post to cite a direct quote, a point that they thought important to consider about the character. But even more important, the student adds to the writer’s interpretation and conclusion by adding “but I kind of got the sense that

he feels that this is the life that's laid out for him." In providing this commentary to the student's response, the reader demonstrates their ability to push their own thinking forward—to take what another person says, consider it, and to draw their own conclusion.

As these two examples demonstrate, very often the writer of the DB post has given the reader a different perspective to consider with regards to Díaz's story, in other words generating new knowledge about the text under review. Both students also comment on writing strategies that they found helpful or that have at least caught the reader's attention (making an argument and using direct quotes/and or examples to support a writer's conclusions). Finally, both readers demonstrate an active engagement with the writer's comments, one that evinces a "conversation" between the reader and the writer. This conversation acts as a form of brainstorming for the reader and possibly for the writer helping each to explore and to expand the ideas that began with the initial post. In that respect, students (reader and writer) can see how this back and forth can help them in their thinking process about how to develop and flesh out an argument.

In this low-stakes assignment, students need to go back into the DB thread and read through what others have written and then decide which two posts they want to respond to. Interestingly, almost everyone in the class receives at least one to three responses for their DB posts. It is a very rare occasion that a post does not receive a response. Sometimes a student will receive five responses making it clear that the writer's comments have grabbed the attention of numerous people. In that scenario, students usually begin by stating: "I agree with your point of view," "interesting point," "I like how you pointed out," "You make great points." But in all cases, the student responders address the point brought up by the writer and then add their thoughts to the writer's comments. This type of back-and-forth response illustrates how students can participate in learning new knowledge from each other.

When everyone has posted to the DB and then responded to the posts of two peers, I go back into Blackboard to collect all the writing from that discussion board thread (both posts and responses to posts) to read. Then I write my own response and general comments to the whole class rather than responding individually to each student. I see my participation as contributing to the conversation already underway. I am just another part of the larger audience. For my response, I usually ask follow-up questions to get students to think further about the topics that they have brought up. To do so, I typically choose a quote from a student's DB post, and then pose a question or comment to get students to see how their ideas could lead to further thinking and expansion. This activity models for students the importance of asking follow-up questions, allowing them to see that their ideas can always be examined further.

By the time I assign the first essay, typically the fourth week of class, the students have already written eight 250-word posts and have responded to 16 posts, writing an average of 100-150 words. While I tell them that the responses need to be at least 100 words in length, students typically write 150 words or more. That they write more than expected, I would argue, demonstrates an important level of engagement with the writer's text. For the most part, students read their peer's post with interest and respond in a thoughtful manner. They are developing a writing relationship with others in the class with me in absentia. Because I do not come in with my general response until all that work has taken place, their responsibility resides with each other.

STEP THREE: REREADING A DB THREAD

Before beginning to write the first essay, I assign one more low-stakes writing exercise. In this assignment, I ask students to choose a previous discussion board thread (DB), one that discusses a story or topic that they think they would possibly like to examine further for their first essay assignment. Typically, they have four to five different DB threads from which to choose. For that assignment, I pose the following questions: (a) read through the entire thread and write a summary of the points that your peers discuss; (b) what conclusions can you draw from your peer's comments; (c) what point (s) do your peers bring up that you consider important to a discussion and understanding of the story? Explain why.

To cite two examples:

Student A: In order to analyze the chapter "Aguantando" in *Drown* by Junto Diaz (sic), we can look to our peers and expand our opinions. It helps to read what others opinion is as well as their viewpoint and what they believe to be important for a story. What I believe to be important for the story its best if we can look back to who Mami is . . . both [students] point out great statements that emphasize that Mami has been left alone to tend for her two boy and being in a poor country leads to counting pennies . . . these two statements show how much Mami had to struggle alone in the Dominican Republic, but I think it shows how much of a fighter she was . . . money was just not easy to obtain so through everything Mami was still able to find a way to provide.

Student B: A majority of my peers focused on the theme of money and the impact it had on Yunior's life as relatively poor young Hispanic man who delivers pool tables to rich

people. Some people mentioned that Yunior’s view of money seems obsessive at times . . . because he never grew up with it and having it in his possession gave him a sense of worth and empowerment. However, a few others had a differing view of money in Yunior’s life saying that he did not care about it at all and just lives day to day with the money he has . . . All of these differing views from the chapter were beneficial for me to read because they gave me more analyses of certain passages and scenes that I had not thought of before on my own.

These two examples demonstrate the reader’s critical engagement with responses from other students after reading through one of the threads. In the first example, student A acknowledges that it is important to see what their peers have said about the short story, “Aguantando” and that in doing so, one can also learn to “expand our opinions.” The student makes it clear that they are most interested in exploring a topic related to Mami, the narrator’s mother, and summarizes what the other students have had to say about Mami. However, she sees their comments only go so far and don’t focus on the specifics of Mami’s personality: “I think it shows how much of a fighter she was.” In that respect, engaging with the student responses, student A takes advantage of the opportunity not only to expand her initial thoughts about Mami but also to help her articulate and concretize her argument.

In the second example, student B ably summarizes what others have to say about the main character and his relationship to money. The summary demonstrates an ability to draw conclusions from a peer’s comments and put them into two competing categories: for some, Yunior appears obsessive about money and for others, he doesn’t seem to care about it. As such, student B uses their critical reading skills to understand the different ways to analyze a character. The student concludes by stating that this assignment has helped them to see “certain passages and scenes” that had been not previously considered. Such a statement also suggests that the student B possibly realizes the importance of “certain passages and scenes” that make a person’s argument much more persuasive. Like the previous DB exercise, this low-stakes assignment allows the students in each example to enter a “conversation” with peers, reflect on their own thinking, draw conclusions, and explain their points—all of which are related to cognitive processes of learning.

STEP FOUR: PEER REVIEW WORKSHOP

For the peer review workshop, I put students into groups of three on Blackboard where they post their rough drafts to the file exchange for others in their group

to read. I also post an assignment that they are meant to follow: (a) briefly summarize the student's paper; (b) what point does the student appear to be making? Evaluate if the writer has been able to accomplish their intention for the essay; (c) identify area (s) of improvement that could help the writer accomplish what they have set out to do and offer a solution.

The first two questions of the assignment basically seek to get the reader to explain and then to articulate what they have read. Only the third one asks them to suggest an area of improvement. Putting more emphasis on reading and summarizing an essay's content gives them more time to think through and analyze what they are reading. In their actual peer reviews, the focus is more on their ability to articulate what they have understood and read. After answering the first two questions, students are then in a better position to address the third point of suggesting an area of improvement and possibly a solution. Summarizing the essay also helps them to see the paper from a more global perspective and not get bogged down in surface-level commentary—the default mode for many students giving a peer review.

For their first essay, the students were asked to choose one of Díaz's short stories from the collection *Drown* and to write a New Critical analysis deploying one literary term in their discussion. As I mentioned earlier, most of the students in this course are not English majors so this type of analysis is quite new to them. The following excerpts demonstrate a few ways that students have learned through reading a peer's essay and then responding to it.

Example One: Reading your introduction lets me see the story from another point of view I had not thought of. Themes of physical and mental violence are evident in “Ysrael”. I appreciate you setting the stage for what type of violence you plan on connecting to your points . . . In the next paragraph the connection of the boys being mentally beaten down by life “violently” is a cool connection . . . Drawing the connection of even Ysrael being attacked by an animal is another nod to your thesis . . . I like your conclusion as it draws everything back to the original thesis of how violence affects the future actions of Yunior, Rafa and even Ysrael being a sole victim of physical and mental violence.

Here, the student from example one demonstrates why it is important to have responders start off by summarizing a peer's essay to ensure that they have read it carefully. In so doing, the student has had the opportunity to observe a few important writing strategies from the peer's paper. First, the student has learned to see the story from a different perspective, one not previously considered. Then

they comment on a few writing strategies gleaned from reading and analyzing the essay: commenting that the student writer has effectively “set the stage” for the reader to explain the type of violence that occurs in the story and observing the importance of the connections that the writer has made that refer to the original thesis. In noting this second writing strategy, the peer reviewer has become aware of possible ways to structure one’s essay, strategies that might be useful in future writing assignments.

Example Two: I really enjoy [sic] reading your essay . . . This is the first time I ever had to critique a classmate work online and in writing, so just bear with me. On the second, third, and fourth paragraphs you talked about motif as a literary device, explained what it is and provided a quote from the story in order to establish the relationship. On the fifth and six paragraph you talked about the point of view as a literary device, explained what it is and provide a quote from the story in order to establish the relationship. On the seventh, eight and nine paragraph you talked about diction. Maybe it would be wise to pick just one literary device to analyze and expand upon it. You developed a strong conclusion, perhaps you could just expand upon it.

Though the peer reviewer disavows any expertise about their ability to give effective feedback, the student then goes on to effectively analyze the person’s essay breaking it down into paragraphs. By briefly outlining the essay, the peer reviewer has come to see that the writer is developing too many topics. The peer reviewer then offers the writer two solutions to the problems—“pick just one literary device to analyze and expand on it” and advises the student to expand on the strong conclusion. Although initially apologizing for never having done a peer review, the student is able to see where a writer can go astray when dealing with too many topics in an essay. While it is difficult to say if this information will successfully transfer to the peer reviewer’s own writing, through analyzing the writer’s paper, the peer reviewer does demonstrate new knowledge about the writing process—the problem with trying to discuss too many topics in one paper.

Example Three: As a reader, I, without question find the discussion convincing. I wrote my essay on the same exact topic and I saw a lot of information and ideas that [the student] used that I could have easily added to my own to make it better but instead felt like I repeated myself often and didn’t add all the examples that I possible could have. Occasionally

I find myself blanking and at a loss even when the answers are right in front of me. I felt like [the student] provided us with endless examples and evidence to back up their thoughts towards this chapter showing a lot of repetition.

In this third example, the student has not attended to the specific directions of the assignment, specifically to summarize the writer's essay. Not surprisingly, in a required intensive-writing course, the student responses for peer review run the gamut from those who are really invested in the course to those students who are less inclined to do so. Nonetheless, in reading through the essay and in writing a response, the peer reviewer has had the opportunity to reflect on their own writing and realize what might be missing in their paper. In their own essay on the same topic, the reviewer explains, "I repeated myself often and didn't add all of the examples I possible could have." By providing a peer review, the student seems to have thought about and considered the importance of citing what they call "endless examples and evidence." In suggesting as much, we can deduce that these "endless examples and evidence" have made the essay a more persuasive one for this student.

In the above examples, we can see these students thinking about writing and thinking about how others go about the practice of writing, thus enhancing their metacognition skills. Through writing a peer review, they have gained in some cases a better understanding of audience and an awareness possibly of the information readers need from a writer. Reading and providing a peer review has helped to generate new knowledge allowing these peer reviewers to observe and to learn new writing strategies that might prove helpful in future writing assignments. Ultimately, for me as an instructor, I place more weight on what the student reviewer has learned in the process of writing and in providing a peer review than on the quality of the feedback for the receiver. Writing, as we all know, is a process, and if a student can learn even one new idea about writing on their own, I would venture to say that information will take them a lot further in developing their writing skills than received advice. It is an example of active learning.

Because reading and responding to each other is an explicit expectation in the course, one that they have continuously participated in with the previous low-stakes assignments, I would argue that students develop a sense of themselves as a community of writers, collaborating and communicating with each other. Thus, the move to do peer review is not the typical one-off assignment. Instead, students participate in giving feedback—reading, analyzing, and composing their thoughts in much of the same manner they have been doing with previous low-stakes writing assignments. Finally, reading each other's essays

affords another opportunity to learn about the writing process to see how others in the class have developed and constructed their essays.

STEP FIVE: REFLECTING ON PEER REVIEW

To get students to reflect on what they have learned by writing a peer review, I ask them to write a reflection piece after they have posted their final draft. In that assignment students respond to the following points: (1) What did you want others to understand from your essay? (2) How did your paper evolve through the process of writing it? (3) What did you learn by giving feedback to others in your group? (4) How did the comments from your peers help you to rework/rethink your paper?

Questions one, two, and four ask students to reflect on what specifically they want to communicate to their audience, the ways in which their essay changed in the process of writing it, and how student comments helped them to rethink their essay. Through all three of these questions, the goal is to get students to think and to reflect on their process of writing their essay and what they have learned in that process.

As compositionists like Kara Taczak have noted, reflection is central to the writing process. An active engagement with reflection as part of the writing process can help a student in their development as a writer (Taczak 78). In her book, *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, Kathleen Blake Yancey details some of the key features of reflection: that it “is dialectical, putting multiple perspectives into play with each other in order to produce insight” (6) and that “[it] entails a looking forward to goals we might attain, as well as casting backward to see where we have been” (6). Yancey concludes that the ability of a student to “articulate” what they have learned in the process of reflection constitutes learning on their part (7).

For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on question number three: what did you learn by giving feedback to others in your group? The following are a few comments students have written in their reflective pieces (emphasis added):

- Giving feedback to others in my group allowed me to realize what I lacked in my own paper. *I saw that many of my peers had amazing introductions* and that was something I lacked.
- Giving feedback to others definitely helped me answer some questions in my own paper after going back to read the first initial draft. *It helped me to understand what details were essential to my topic and what details sort of just went on a rant.*

- By giving feedback to others, I realized that others were struggling as much as I did, and I was happy to help as much as I could because then I could learn a thing or two as well. *I read a couple of very well written essays and it really gave me something to think about.*
- *What I learned from providing feedback to the others in my group is the necessary elements that my own paper lacked . . .* Even after I revised my first draft, it still lacked organization. I learned this by reading my peers' papers because I realized how organized and easy to read their papers were, versus my own paper. I tended to avoid using transitional words but realized they were important in guiding my readers through my paper.
- By giving feedback to others *I learned that it was helpful to provide them my opinion for another person's point of view.* As I was reading my peers essays [sic] I also noticed how strong and detailed they were which made me realize, I should go back to my own essay and re read it.
- When I was giving feedback to the one's in my group, *it helped me analyze a paper and really decipher what to be looking for within the essay.* By proofreading my classmate's work, it gave me a chance to reevaluate how well I need to look at my own work. I also enjoyed reading about people's arguments and the way *they provided their examples toward their essay topic.*

In their comments, students allude to the dialectical aspects of reflection—to a sense of “looking forward” and “casting backward.” Through the interplay between reading a peer's essay and providing comments, students can identify aspects of the writing they thought noteworthy (“amazing introductions,” “details,” “organization,” etc.). At the same time, their comments gesture to this idea of “casting backward” (what was missing in their essays) and of “looking forward” (to revise accordingly). Their ability to critically engage ideas in this manner and to remark upon them, I would argue, points to the learning that has taken place for them in their development as a writer. Moreover, their acknowledgement of what they have learned in the process of providing a peer review distinguishes it from its usual characterization as busy work to one that demonstrates a real engagement with their peers.

Throughout the semester, the scaffolding and peer review process occurs for three different essay assignments. This repetition of reading, writing, and responding in the discussion board, of providing peer reviews, and of reflecting on the writing process demonstrates the importance of the collaborative nature of writing for students. By repeating this scaffolding of writing activities, students get a better understanding of how peer review operates as an integral part of the

writing process and of their development as writers. Finally, as their reflection comments suggest, they also develop a sense of agency as writers through an articulation of what they have learned and what could be valuable to them going forward.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research in the education field offers composition instructors a different way to think about the practice of peer review. Too often, instructors tie peer review primarily to the improvement imperative. In so doing, the learning that can accompany the practice of peer review gets discounted. Research in the field of education suggests that more attention should be paid to what students learn by providing comments. It offers writing studies instructors a way to rethink peer review extricated from a focus on outcomes in peer review that too frequently results in instructor and student dissatisfaction. Redirecting attention to what a student learns through giving comments can better enable them to see their own possible development in writing.

By scaffolding writing activities leading up to peer review, students come to see it as an integral part of the writing process. The repetition of reading, writing, and responding to each other through the discussion board, of providing peer reviews, and of reflecting on the writing process underscores the importance and the totality of each component and how all the various components support each other. Engaged in this semester-long process, students tend to develop a better sense of agency of themselves as writers that is further enhanced through the continual collaboration and support of their peers.

Over the years, peer review has been a constant evolving learning experience for me—of rethinking and of rearticulating a practice that I consider to be a central to the teaching of writing. No doubt, it will continue to engage and challenge all of us as practitioners. Ultimately, as E. Shelley Reid counsels, our goal should be “to teach students to *become reviewers* rather than to *complete successful reviews*” (229). If we keep that goal in mind, this shift in pedagogical emphasis will enable peer review to be a more positive experience for our students and for ourselves as educators—one where we all have the potential to learn.

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