

CHAPTER 7.

PEER REVIEW AND THE BENEFITS OF ANXIETY IN THE ACADEMIC WRITING CLASSROOM

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Peer review activities are now an integral part of the teaching of academic writing in most universities, and the benefits of such student-centered teaching methods are well-documented (Lundstrom and Baker). However, one of the most serious concerns regarding peer review is that it can potentially increase anxiety for learners. This anxiety is two-fold; both the giving of feedback and the reception of criticism can induce feelings of discomfort for students (Winer; Murau; Liu and Sadler). Moreover, in order for peer review activities to be successfully implemented, a desire amongst students to want to help each other as part of a learning community needs to be in place. This chapter aims to investigate the role that self-reflection on the peer review process can play in alleviating student anxiety, whilst simultaneously helping to foster empathy and community spirit within a group. The present study examines the way in which students articulate their emotional responses to peer review. One of the central assumptions that this current piece will challenge is whether anxiety is necessarily always negative. Clearly, too much anxiety can be detrimental and even paralyzing to students. However, a degree of anxiety can be beneficial in raising levels of student achievement and ensuring that all students get the most out of a learning situation.

Anxiety is usually understood to be a detrimental emotional response in a learning environment and there are a vast number of studies which explore the negative facets of learner anxiety (Zeidner; Wu and Lin; Demirel). According to Moshe Zeidner's contribution to the *International Handbook of Emotions in Education*, "[t]he core theme in anxiety is danger or threat to ego or self-esteem, especially when a person is facing an uncertain existential threat" (Zeidner 267). Zeidner explains that anxiety frequently occurs in educational settings particularly in social situations where there is "the prospect of personal evaluation," whether "real or imagined." This anxiety is at its most salient, according to Zeidner, "when a student perceives a low likelihood of obtaining satisfactory

evaluations from others” (269). Peer review situations, in particular those which are classroom based, may be likely to cause anxiety as they normally involve appraisal by one’s peers in situations which entail a high degree of social interaction. For this reason, understanding anxiety in relation to classroom-based peer review is crucial.

Challenging the conception that anxiety is unequivocally negative, Peter MacIntyre and Jean-Marc Devaele, ponder the suggestion that “a focus on anxiety’s negative effects is dealing with only half of the issue” (240) and rather propose exploring positive as well as negative facets of the learner experience. In their study of the second language classroom, MacIntyre and Devaele discuss the complex “emotional dynamics” which mean that “anxiety and enjoyment” are not necessarily mutually exclusive (261); in other words, that it is possible for a learner to simultaneously experience positive emotions and anxiety at one and the same time. Along similar lines, it has been suggested that anxiety should not always be conceived as undesirable as it is a necessary part of grappling with complexity and uncertainty (Barnett 252). Learning is about coming to terms with the inevitable anxiety which accompanies sometimes bumpy and uncomfortable educational journeys across thresholds into new understandings and competencies. According to Ronald Barnett’s manifesto, learning in an age of uncertainty is “a matter of learning to live with uncertainty.” Barnett proposes “a form of learning that sets out not to dissolve anxiety—for it recognizes that that is not feasible—but that sets out to provide the human wherewithal to live with anxiety” (Barnett 252). Acknowledging that, for some students, a degree of anxiety is inevitable when it comes to peer review, we can look for ways to harness this anxiety so that it becomes constructive to learning rather than detrimental.

As with other forms of peer learning, it is of vital importance that educational facilitators recognize the emotional facets of implementing peer review activities in the classroom (Boud 4). The present chapter will consider findings from an academic writing course, originally developed by Fabian Beijer at the English Unit at Lund University, Sweden. This is a classroom-based course in which peer review was conducted face-to-face. Evidence of student perceptions of the peer review process has been taken from 95 learning journals, collected over eight semesters, in which students were asked to record their reactions to participating in such activities. Even though I explore the process of peer review from a particularly Swedish perspective, where collaborative practices are the norm and, to some extent, entrenched in the Swedish psyche, students nevertheless tend to express nervousness about both giving and receiving feedback. In addition to exploring how students articulate their emotional responses to peer review, I also make practical suggestions about how these reactions can be addressed. By encouraging self-reflection on the peer review process, I suggest

that negative emotional responses can be reconceived in a more positive light. Not only do students benefit from the peer review in terms of developing the critical and analytic competencies in relation to their academic writing abilities, but they also develop crucial graduate competencies related to reflective practice. Reflecting on what makes the peer review process potentially anxiety-provoking leads students to better understand and use these usually negative responses.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Indebted to David Boud's recognition of the importance of the emotional aspects of peer review, there is now a nascent body of work exploring the role of feelings and perceptions in relation this kind of peer-to-peer activity. Sara Värlander, for instance, premises her research into students' emotional response to receiving feedback on the notion that "[e]motions are constitutive of the activity of learning and shape the learning experiences" (149); in other words, it is imperative to give due regard to emotions in learning environments not just because they are by-products of any given situation, but since they play an active role in shaping that situation. Furthermore, Värlander articulates the complexity inherent in the fact that emotions are not merely the "product of individual experiences" but are instead constituted through "social relationships in the classroom between peers, and between peers and tutors" (149). These complexities mean that the findings from research into student perceptions of peer review activities tend to be highly socially contingent.

In a recent review based on evidence from 103 articles, Carrie Yea-huey Chang points to the burgeoning research in peer review in both the L1 and L2 classroom which began in the 1980s and is still very much alive today. Chang's synthesis of two decades of peer review research, with a particular focus on the L2 context, provides a valuable resource to those seeking an overview of current research. Research on student perceptions in peer review - defined by Chang as that which "refer[s] to learners' beliefs and attitudes toward peer review" (86)—forms one of the three central pillars in Chang's account. And one of the main conclusions drawn from this synthesis regarding this strand of peer review research is that "[m]ore studies are needed to understand student writers' and reviewers' respective attitudes toward/perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of peer review" (107).

Recent research in the field of student perceptions has suggested that making use of peer review in the classroom can have a positive effect on combating writing anxiety, particularly amongst non-native speakers of English. Gülşah Çınar Yastıba and Ahmet Erdost Yastıbaş's findings suggest that Turkish students in the English as a foreign language classroom tend to perceive peer review as an

encouraging and affirming activity which “reduces their writing anxiety” (537). Yastiba and Yastiba report that peer review enables students to recognize that “making mistakes is a part of learning and they can help each other in improving their writings by interacting and collaborating with each other” thus contributing to a “less anxious and stressful” learning environment (537). However, there may be some circularity in the argument that peer review can contribute to a more collaborative and thus less-anxiety provoking experience for students since alternative studies have shown that peer review activities are at their most effective when such a cooperative environment already exists. For instance, Gayle L. Nelson and John M. Murphy have found that “[w]hen writers interacted with their peers in a cooperative manner, they were more likely to use the peers’ suggestions in revising. When writers interacted with their peers in a defensive manner or did not interact at all, the writer was less likely to use the peers’ comments” (140). Whether peer review itself can help to produce this cooperative environment, or whether peer review only functions well if this environment is already in place, is a question which remains as yet unanswered.

One of the resounding arguments in favor of peer review is its role in enabling learners to develop autonomy in relation to the decision that students make in evaluating their own work. For instance, in having to grapple with receiving conflicting advice from their peers, learners must decide for themselves what action to take in their own writing based on feedback received. This is affirmed by David Nicol, Avril Thomson and Caroline Breslin in their recent study investigating the cognitive processes involved in peer review. Exploring students’ perceptions of the benefits of both giving and receiving feedback, Nicol et al. report on the fact that students who engaged in peer review felt an increased sense of control over their own learning journey which was primarily a result of “the reflective process it [peer review] engenders.” Nicol et al. conclude that “[t]his form of control goes well beyond students becoming better users of teacher feedback, as it puts feedback processes firmly in their hands” (118). Furthermore, previous research has suggested that peer review can facilitate the development of competencies that go beyond the classroom to benefit students in their chosen paths beyond the university walls. Nicol et al. note that in staging peer review in such a way that “feedback production is recognised as just as valuable for learning as feedback receipt” can empower students in cultivating skills which will form an important part in “professional life beyond university” (120).

However, despite its well-enumerated advantages in terms of tackling writer anxiety and in the development of cognitive competencies which extend to facets of life beyond the classroom, peer review in itself can often be a source of anxiety for students. Winer’s 1992 diary study based on student-teachers’ reflections on the peer review process concluded that the “feelings of insecurity,

anxiety, and dread expressed” by students requires some form of intervention in order to circumvent obstacles to learning (76). Andrea Murau’s investigation into student perceptions of peer review in the 1990s was, along with Winer’s study, one of the earlier explorations on the “possible negative effect of peer review on writing anxiety” (72). Murau recognized that student often experienced feelings of embarrassment both in the giving and receiving of criticism. The results of Murau’s study suggest that both first language (L1) and second language (L2) learners who participated in peer review tended to feel either anxious or embarrassed by the process, but where L1 learners perceived the overall positive effect of peer review to offset these negative emotions, L2 learners “noted more negative feelings about it than positive” (74). One recommendation made as a result of these findings was that teachers who are considering conducting peer review in their own classrooms should first of all inquire into how students feel about having their work reviewed by their peers and reviewing the work of others. By conducting such a pre-peer review evaluation teachers might be able to mediate some of the negative reactions to the process. Maria Amores suggests that the student perceptions of peer review are often overlooked by teachers who fail to see beyond the effects that peer review has on improving writing to the elements of social interaction with which students are most concerned. Amores writes that the students who formed the basis for her study “seemed to be more concerned with the personal, social, and emotional aspects of peer-editing (e.g., who has the “right” to impose views).” Accordingly, “they accommodated their speech to the ‘threatening’ situation so they would not hurt each other’s feelings” (Amores 521). Amores found definitively that peer review “generates a sense of discomfort and uneasiness among the participants” (519).

Amongst more recent studies which support Amores’ findings is that conducted by Raoul Mulder et al. in which approximately half of students in the sample group expressed anxiety towards peer review which stemmed from a variety of concerns. The most prominent of these concerns was in striking “the right tone and balance between positive and negative feedback” (Mulder et al., 662). In addition to worries about abilities to communicate feedback in an appropriately constructive way without causing offense, students in the Mulder et al. study also raised concerns in relation to reviewers potentially being “too nice.” A significant proportion of students in the study also had concerns over their authority as givers of feedback given their lack of experience in providing such feedback (Mulder et al. 662). Even though students reported an overall positive experience of peer review regarding the value to learning, concerns about the authority of feedback given remained. These findings relating to fears about peers being appropriately qualified to give feedback are ones that are substantiated by other similar studies (for instance Cheng and Warren).

Though the more recent studies cited above have begun to make headway in examining student perceptions of peer review, there is still a consensus that this research is still in its infancy. As Nicol et al. testify, “[t]here is no doubt that more research is required on peer review and its different components, including more studies of students’ experiences, perceptions and responses to the different feedback arrangements that are possible during its implementation” (119). From the disparity of the results from studies on peer review and student perceptions, inferences can be drawn that outcomes vary greatly depending on the social context and individual group dynamics in any given situation. However, it seems reasonable to expect that in any given classroom and in any given context there will be individuals who respond negatively towards peer review for a variety of reasons.

Where the gap in previous research is at its broadest is in examining ways to mediate the negative emotional responses to peer review. One of the exceptions in this body of scholarship is a study conducted by Jun Liu and Randall W. Sadler in which they recognize that “the nature of responding to peers’ drafts sometimes generates a sense of discomfort and uneasiness among the participants” which can generate a tendency for students to act “defensively” in the face of peer criticism (194). Liu and Sadler suggest that combining computer-mediated feedback with the traditional face-to-face peer-review format is one way to tackle this problem.

One study which, like the present paper, has also explored the role that learning journal reflection can play in charting student perception of peer review is that conducted by Daniel Boase-Jelinek, Jenni Parker and Jan Herrington. Here Boase-Jelinek et al. make use of blog entries made by students which charted their observations on peer assessment. Amongst the conclusions drawn from this study was the fact that although most students reported positive reactions to the peer-review activities, a significant proportion of students expressed anxiety particularly in relation to the giving of feedback. This anxiety often stemmed from “concern[s] about offending a peer with critical (corrective) comments” (Boase-Jelinek et al. 125). Interestingly though, the authors of the study also note that students often reported a mixture of both positive and negative reactions. As an example, they cite a student who manages, through the process of reflection, to articulate how what initially felt like a “personal attack” was actually “designed to help you get better marks” and as such, in the words of the particular student in question, was able to “stop being upset” once the benefit was realized (126).

Winer reports that the mere fact of recording their reflections acted as a “powerful trigger to awareness and thus development” (64) and described progress in relation to self-awareness throughout the course as “stunning” (77). This present study builds on the existing body of research which has begun to explore

peer review in terms of student perception but looks more deeply into the role that reflection can play in helping students to negotiate some of the perceived negative emotional reactions to both giving and receiving peer feedback. In *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* David Boud, Rosemary Keogh, David Walker state that despite the fact that “emotions and feelings are a significant source of learning, they can also at times become barriers” (29).

When these feelings and emotions form roadblocks in learning, they “need to be recognized as such and removed before the learning process can proceed” (29). Reflection is, according to Boud et al., an effective means with which to pass through potential obstructions which might be the result of negative feelings and emotions. Since the capacity for critical reflection “may be innately present in only a small proportion of students” (Coulson and Harvey 401), scaffolding to enable such reflection, particularly when it comes the emotional components of experiential learning, is important: “Supporting learners to develop their capacity for reflection and structuring opportunities for reflection before, during and after the experience will enable learners to navigate the inherent complexities of learning through experience” (Coulson and Harvey 403). My investigation is underpinned by this philosophy and is supported by Winer’s still relevant findings related to the positive impact of scaffolding peer review with reflective activities.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Murau’s study recommended that teachers consider assessing how each individual cohort of students feel about peer review *before* implementing such activities. Likewise, in offering recommendations for the effective implementation of peer review, Jette G. Hansen and Jun Liu suggest that facilitators should actively work to encourage classroom reflection and discussion in relation to students’ prior experience of peer review activities and the cultural norms that shape these experiences (33). These recommendations underpinned the design of the reflective scaffolding around the peer review activities in this particular study. In what follows, a brief description of the peer review component of the course will be provided, along with a description of the reflective learning journal which supplemented the peer review activities. The course on which the analysis in this present paper has been based is an undergraduate level academic writing and written proficiency course provided by the English unit at a Swedish university.

The students who took this course came from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds. The course was worth 7.5 credits (equivalent to European Credit Transfer System points), equating to one-quarter of a full-time workload over one semester. This study spans eight semesters from between the spring of 2012

to the spring of 2016. The course ran during both the autumn and the spring semesters, and the reflections have been taken from those semesters in which I was course moderator. During the five-year span over which the reflections have been taken, the course has inevitably been subject to development and revision. Where the revisions have particular bearing on the present study, they have been duly noted. Here I focus specifically on student reflections in the learning journal component in which students were required to record their reflections on their journey through the course. The learning journal was a supplement to two other assessed components in the course: a grammar exam and an academic essay task.

The highest stakes assignment on the course was an academic essay (worth 50 percent of the overall grade). Students were asked to write an essay on a subject of their choice and took part in three in-class peer review sessions at various points in the writing process. Students were divided into small peer groups typically comprised of 3 to 5 students. Peer groups were randomly assigned and, where possible, were kept the same for all three peer review sessions in order to facilitate continuity and foster a sense of community spirit within each group. At each peer review session, students were asked to read and prepare comments on the draft prior to coming to class, and then to deliver feedback verbally in the classroom situation. Students were provided with a list of questions to consider in relation to each essay draft. As well as receiving peer-to-peer feedback, teacher feedback on essay drafts was also provided. Prior to the first peer feedback session, a presentation on effective feedback techniques was given alongside a class discussion on students' previous experience of peer review and the perceived benefits and drawbacks. After each peer review session, students were given the chance to share their thoughts on the process in an activity debriefing. In the autumn of 2013, I introduced structured reflection questions which students could use to scaffold their own reflections immediately after the activity took place.

Keeping a learning journal was an obligatory part of the course and allowed students to chart their progress in a dialogue with the teacher. Course participants submitted a total of five short reflective entries staggered at strategic timings throughout the semester. In these entries, participants were encouraged to reflect on the course and the learning material as well as their own learning journey. The purpose of the learning journals was multifaceted. As well as encouraging the development of higher order critical thinking skills, the learning journals offered an avenue for participants to overcome some of the challenges with writer's block, lack of confidence and the development of voice. It also allowed for a two-way conversation between teacher and student, and I was able to respond to concerns raised by students and address potential roadblocks to

learning at an early stage. The final learning journal containing all five entries was submitted for assessment at the end of the course. One of the potential limitations of this study is that the recorded reflections that form the basis for the present analysis were part of the assessment for the course, and this may have had some bearing on the texts provided by students. However, the impact of this is potentially lessened by the fact that this was a low-stakes assignment for which the grading criteria emphasized the importance of critical reflection and personal exploration. In the autumn of 2013, the instructions of the learning journal were revised such that rather than submitting completely open journal entries, students were instead asked to reflect on specific topics and additional scaffolding, such as questions to consider, were provided. Inevitably, this shaped the contents of learning journal entries which became more directed. This may of course be interpreted either positively or negatively in terms of this study. On the one hand, providing more scaffolding for students to structure their reflections potentially allowed for more focused and ultimately fruitful reflections. On the other hand, such scaffolding might be conceived as leading and might subtly prompt the writer to respond in a certain way.

In interpreting the learning journal reflections in the following analysis, I have remained alert to this potential limitation. In this study students taking the course from the autumn of 2013 and onwards were asked to reflect specifically on the peer review process in one particular journal entry. Prior to composing the entry, students were encouraged to consider questions prompting reflection of their past experiences of peer review in learning environments. They were asked to consider what they perceived to be the most significant benefits and drawbacks of peer review in general and how they felt about the peer review activities on this particular course. They were asked to reflect on their experience as both giver and receiver of feedback and consider the impact of their feelings towards the process. Other entries in the journal were more open and discussing the peer review component of the course was just one of many options open to students. Many students chose to make use of the open entries to discuss their thoughts about the peer review activities throughout the course.

ANALYSIS

Allowing students the opportunity to express their opinions before, during and after feedback sessions was one way in which I was able to monitor student reactions throughout the course. What follows is a qualitative analysis of students' learning journal reflections. The majority of the participants reported positive feelings towards the peer review process. Students frequently described that they perceived the peer reviews to be "fun," "rewarding," "pleasurable," and one

student went so far as to describe the process as “thrilling.” It was also not uncommon for students to report that the peer review discussions enabled them to bridge threshold concepts, allowing them to experience a sense of breakthrough; as one student relates: “I am finally on to something! This essay seems terrific and the peer review sessions truly rewarding.” Typically, students valued the generally friendly and cooperative atmosphere within groups. Other students remarked on the benefits of receiving multiple sets of eyes on their texts as well generally positive group dynamics that meant they were “not afraid” to deliver constructive comments.

Some of the students also wrote in their journal entries that the benefits of the peer review extended beyond the confines of the classroom, with peer groups forming support networks facilitated by additional student-arranged peer group meetings and social networking sites such as Facebook. The mainly positive responses to the peer review process could be part of the dangers inherent in requiring students to submit learning journal reflections as part of the assessment for the course; though this was a low-stakes assignment, it did contribute to the overall grade for the course and therefore there is a hazard that students were disinclined to emphasize the pitfalls. For this reason, I have chosen to treat such responses with caution and instead concentrate my analysis on the conventionally understood negative emotional reactions, particularly those that involve feelings of anxiety, that students express in their journal reflections. Where I explore what might be said to be positive reactions, they are usually those that are arrived at firstly by working through perceived negative responses. The tripartite structure for the analysis below is structured around three pillars: anxiety about giving feedback, anxiety about receiving feedback, and finally, using reflection to mediate anxiety.

ANXIETY ABOUT GIVING FEEDBACK

From the evidence from learning journal reflections, it was overwhelmingly clear that one of the main concerns of students who expressed negative feelings about reviewing their peers was anxiety about giving feedback. Many students reported a general sense of being outside of their comfort zone in delivering feedback, and much of this unease appeared to stem from a well-intentioned desire not to harm the feelings of others within the peer group as the following extracts demonstrate:

“I found it quite hard to criticize others’ work since I wanted to give constructive criticism without being mean.”

“I try to tone down my personality when doing so though,

since I can come across as aggressive and I do not wish to make anyone upset because of something I have said.”

More specifically, the analysis of the journal reflections identified a trend in those who reported anxiety related to the giving of feedback which connected the giving of feedback with a sense of the lack of authority to be providing such feedback. These findings accord with those of previous research (Cheng and Warren; Mulder et al.). Students found it disconcerting to be asked to undertake such a task when they felt they lacked adequate practice. The following extract illustrates such responses: “I *really* don’t like to criticize the others. It would feel ok if I was an expert on the subject but I’m as new to this as the others and it just feels weird to tell somebody that their choice of word or structure is bad.” Other students commented that only the teacher should have the authority to provide such feedback and remarked on anxieties about not being properly qualified to formulate and deliver comments in an appropriate and pedagogically sound way that did not risk offending other students. There was also a tendency to worry about how such feedback might be received by fellow students.

With the exception of just a few course participants, students’ mother tongue was not English, and several students reflected on the fact that this served to increase anxiety when delivering feedback by increasingly this sense of absence of authority. Lack of confidence in one’s ability to use the language with preciseness, subtlety, and in the desired tone was reported by more than one student, and is exemplified in the following extract:

My ability to express a balanced critique is limited and although I am sure my point becomes clear, it is sometimes expressed clumsily and sounds more rough and mean than I intend it to come across as, or all too soft. So it is a hard, but necessary practice. Therefore, it is good that the practice can take place within this group, since no one has English as his or her mother tongue and limitations are accepted.”

Though this study was not comparative and does not intend to make conclusions about the differences between L1 and L2 learners (nor could it possibly be equipped to do so), findings from the set of learning journals analyzed in this study seem to accord with Murau’s 1993 article which posits that L2 learners tend to experience a higher degree of negative feelings in the peer review process than their L1 counterparts.

ANXIETY ABOUT RECEIVING FEEDBACK

It is interesting to note that concerns about giving feedback were sometimes directly related to corresponding concerns about receiving feedback:

Giving feedback was a bit difficult, but I still think it's a very good exercise. I'm always a bit concerned about hurting other people's feelings, probably because I'm not very good at receiving feedback myself. I often take it personally when someone criticizes something I've done, even though I know it isn't personal. So practicing [. . .] how to give and receive feedback has probably been good for me.

Though it did not feature in journal entries with such a high prevalence, the second most significant source of anxiety apparent was that associated with being on the receiving end of feedback. The very fact that students were more concerned about hurting the feelings of others, rather than being hurt themselves is in its own right worthy of discussion. I would agree with Cheryl Hogue Smith's suggestion that in classroom-based peer review "[s]tudents [. . .] tend to be anxious and distracted during the face-to-face peer review process because they often pay more attention to the peer marking their paper than they do to the paper they are supposed to be reviewing" (27). Smith's subsequent claim that this is particularly the case when students "perceive that peer to be a more effective and successful student," (27) appears perhaps not to apply so strongly from the evidence garnered in this project. Yes, students were sometimes more concerned with the person than the paper; however, this was largely out of empathy for their peer, rather than out of concern for their own perceived inadequacies.

Anxiety in respect to being the reviewee was sometimes seemingly the result of inexperience at being on the receiving end of feedback, but was, in the case of the extract below, part and parcel of concerns about whether peer reviewers were qualified to be providing feedback:

I felt nervous before our first peer review session. Not only was it the first peer review session of this course but also the first in my life. I have never been judged and criticized in the process of writing an essay by a student before - this role has always fallen on my tutor. [. . .] I remember how nervous I was, especially before the first peer review session, but all the peer review seminars went well.

Furthermore, several students reported feelings closely aligned with anxiety, such as confusion and frustration, when it came to receiving conflicting advice. Sometimes this sense of frustration was the result of receiving opposing advice from different peer group members, or advice which contradicted teacher feedback. However, sometimes, this frustration appeared to be the upshot of disparities between their own expectations of what a good essay consisted of,

and the expectation of their peers. This was particularly the case in students who reported coming from non-Swedish educational backgrounds. One such student related that the cultural differences in expectations led to annoyance; in this particular instance, balancing a conviction that one's own approach was the "right" one with contradicting viewpoints became difficult for the author to reconcile. There were a wide range of opinions amongst students with regard to the potential advantages and drawbacks of a disciplinary and culturally diverse peer review with some students remarking particularly on the fruitful "cultural osmosis" between students and their ideas.

USING REFLECTION TO MEDIATE ANXIETY

Evaluation, be it "through examinations, appraisals, reviews, observations, student ratings or even just friendly critics," can, according to Greg Light et al., elicit anxious and defensive responses from students. Light et al. suggest that most academics are familiar with the feeling of anxiety as we ourselves are frequently evaluated in various guises, including self-evaluation, and oftentimes find that we are our own worst critics. However, the authors point to the idea that "anxiety can change to pleasure" given the appropriate measures of engagement with the evaluative comments. We should, accordingly, "link the critical process with a constructive one" (Light et al. 237-238).

In this particular study I was able to draw the general conclusion that when students were given the appropriate scaffolding with which to approach peer review and were provided with support on how to deal with the feedback received, they were more inclined to perceive the process as constructive and to experience a reduced degree of anxiety. What I tended to see was that students were able to use the reflective process facilitated by the learning journal to take criticism, reflect upon it, and thus flip previously negative reactions into essentially more positive ones; in the words of Light, "anxiety" was reconceived as "pleasure," at least to a certain degree.

Whilst a not insubstantial proportion of participants reported negative emotions akin to anxiety, I found that quite often they did so whilst concurrently contemplating the affirmative nature of the peer review process. For some students this change in attitude appeared early on in the learning journal, suggesting that even just brief reflection is sometimes enough to elicit positive results. For other students, the change manifested itself more gradually over time. It is important to recognize that the process of change is not always instantaneous and might require more prolonged reflection. A number of students reported that though they might have had prior concerns about the peer review activities, these fears were not realized. For other students, in the move from negative to

positive emotional responses, it was the anxiety itself that became the driving force behind change. As one student articulates, anxiety can actually be perceived as helpful:

I don't really like to criticize others but I very much liked to hear what the others had to say about my plan and I got a few good advices. [. . .] I'm still stressed and a bit worried but it's the helpful kind of stress that makes me more focused. Hopefully I won't get too fried at the peer review session.

However, the student's use of the word "fried" could potentially imply a more negative attitude toward the forthcoming peer review. Though "fried" might be used light-heartedly in this context, it could also be an indication that although they recognize the potential benefits of anxiety, continued reflection on the process may be necessary to ensure that productive anxiety does not transform into damaging anxiety.

Likewise, a further student communicates a similar attitude when they write of the importance of developing the higher order critical thinking and evaluation competencies that activities such as peer review nurture:

By discussion of them in our group, we have learned how to formulate both critical and positive feedback in an academic way. I think that it is important to keep in mind that the conception "feedback" is more about giving proposals about how to improve the text rather than to try to find as many faults as possible—which really are not what constructive feedback is about. I prefer to see it as something positive, something that can help us to both give and receive assistance and support in our writings.

This student demonstrates a conceptual shift, interpreting an emotional response commonly understood as detrimental and instead reconceiving it more favorably. Within the collection of learning journals that I analyzed I found several other examples where students had used words like "thrilling," or "exciting" to describe similar feelings that others had articulated in less positive terms. In the extract below, the student describes actively looking forward to being, in their own words, "grilled" by their peers even though they feel uncertain about the quality of work they have submitted for evaluation:

The essay plan has been submitted and I have signaled my continued commitment to the course. I am not entirely convinced by my plan nor of my ability to execute it. But it

is now out there, ready to be scrutinized by my peers. I am looking forward to be grilled.

As already mentioned, the learning journals offered students the opportunity to work through some of their potentially negative initial responses. It was relatively common to witness in the journal entries the actualization of the transformative reflective process. One student reported that though they might be upset by criticism during the peer review process, this dissipated over the course of several days: “You might get upset when receiving a negative response, but after a few days you realize that it might actually be true, and you appreciate that somebody told you before handing in the final version to be graded.” The learning journal allowed this student to view the event from a temporal distance from which they could appreciate the value of the criticism received. Often, the learning journal offered the participant the space to think about how defensive attitudes to receiving feedback might be potentially counterproductive and to reconceive their initial reactions with a more positive slant. For instance, one student’s early journal entry expressed a rather negative attitude towards peer review:

The peer-review sessions have not been very rewarding even though it is a good idea. It feels as if we all know each other so poorly that everyone is afraid of being rude. This has the consequence that everyone tries to be very nice and exaggerate the positive parts and just mentions the [weaker] parts incidentally.

However, a later entry demonstrates just how much this attitude had changed during the course:

The final peer-review session was way better than the first one. It was really good that you were clear about how important it was and it got clear for me that I need to work extra on before I hand it in.

The student’s reported altered attitude to peer review could be the result of various reasons, such as improved group dynamics and an increased sense of security within this group, as well as a greater familiarity with the course and increased writing confidence. However, the fact that the student specifically mentions the scaffolding (“you were clear about how important it was”) adds weight to the claim that this contributed to the more favorable outcome in this case.

The very act of writing about the process appeared to be, in some instances, the catalyst to change. Interestingly, in one student reflection, it was possible to

see meta-level reflection occurring in which the process of writing about the peer review experience is actively recognized as the stimulus for reframing negative perceptions. In the extract below, the student first reflects on their perfectionist tendencies and how these contributed to peer-review nerves:

I'm a bit nervous because I always rewrite my essay a million times before I'm happy and I don't want anyone to think my essay isn't good enough before I'm done and happy with it myself. I wasn't sure if the peer review was good or bad for me. I came in to class with a subject and an essay plan that I was pleased with but I left feeling very unsure with my subject, thesis and if my essay could be argumentative enough. Everyone in my group gave me such good feedback and asked just the right questions that made me wonder if this was going to be a too difficult subject.

Despite the fact that the journal entry reports a sense of unease immediately following the peer review, on figuratively putting pen to paper, the author is able to concretize their thoughts and recognize previously unobserved positives:

It took me until I sat down to write this to realize that the peer review session was actually really helpful. Much more than I thought [it] would be. It made me question the essay in a good way and it might have saved me from writing an essay around a subject that wouldn't have worked.

In line with one of the basic premises of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, in this instance we can clearly witness an instance of *writing as thinking* (Bazeman et al.; Bean). It took the author of the above extract “until they sat down to write” the entry to make the discovery. Without this process of reflection, the student could well have been left with a lingering negative attitude towards the peer review session but was able to transform this into a more constructive attitude. Recognizing that it is the process of writing itself which has occasioned this change is in itself a valuable tool for future learning for the student.

In other learning journal entries, it was apparent that students were able to use the writing process to mediate and come to terms with some of the negative emotions involved in the peer review process. One such participant talks about “worries” and “fears” related to the receipt of feedback in a general sense but then gravitates the discussion to how the process can function as a “challenge” to precipitate development in both one's own work and in the work of others. Another student who reports having had experience of the peer review process

beyond the current course, uses the writing and reflection process to articulate something of the journey that they have been through:

I myself know that I have grown with my practice through the English courses I have taken these three semesters. I, like my current group, was unsure in the beginning about what I should focus my critique on and I was afraid I would hurt the recipient's feelings. The suggestions I gave a year ago were vague in an attempt to not step on anyone's toes, as were most of the ones I received during this peer review session. That kind of critique is usually not very helpful when writing your essay, as those things are usually things you are aware of. Good peer reviewing is when you step out of your comfort box, looking at the text with a critical eye, and give honest but constructive critique. Honest/blunt critique might momentarily make someone feel poorly about their text as it is someone pointing out a flaw in something they made, but as long as the critique is constructive it leads to a better essay in the end. However, it is not always easy to take that step towards honesty/bluntness in one's comments, especially not when you are addressing the author directly.

Here the participant recognizes their former self in other less experienced group members, reflecting on common fears about framing feedback in such a way as to avoid offense. Formulating feedback in an appropriate and constructive tone is in this particular instance, a bridge that the student has struggled to cross, but from the other side is able to see its value.

Even some of those students who initially had doubts (generally expressed in early entries) about the usefulness of the peer review process reported that their perceptions had changed having experienced the classroom sessions first-hand. For instance, one student who "confessed" to being "a little bit skeptical" about the peer review because of a reluctance "to criticize directly someone's work when the person concerned stands in front of them." The participant goes on to reveal that they imagined the peer review would be so "uncomfortable" that they would be unable to participate. Fortunately, in this case, the process "wasn't the traumatic experience" the student thought it would be and reports that:

My overall impression about the experience of the peer review process is positive: it made me face a great number of issues that I was able to solve thanks to my group mates' help.

What is particularly noteworthy about this entry is not that the peer review process turned out to be easy, or even comfortable for the student, but that it

forced a confrontation with difficult tasks which ultimately proved rewarding. What the learning journal has allowed in this case, is a recognition that facing such situations can be meaningful.

It is worthwhile to quote at length from another course participant who, though initially uncomfortable (the experience is described as “very unpleasant”), came to realize the benefits of the process on reflection:

Even if it was a very unpleasant experience at the time, I still felt (already when it happened) that it was a very valuable experience for me. I was quite surprised at my own strong reaction (I thought I was beyond taking comments on my written works personal since I have gone through such processes several times, during education, with my supervisors, when having articles peer-reviewed etc.). It made me think a lot about how the students I teach experience the peer-reviewing processes I let them go through. Hopefully, this has made me more careful when commenting on other people’s works, trying to be a little more considerate. If I myself, who is used to peer-reviewing and consider myself quite an experienced student, could feel so miserable and powerless in a situation like that, I imagine that it must be ten times worse for someone who is not as experienced, perhaps taking his/her first course at the university and being in a group where everybody else might have more experience. This is something that I try to bear in mind when I teach.

In this instance, the participant reflects upon their role both as a student on this particular course, but also as a teacher elsewhere. Even though they consider themselves to be experienced at both giving and receiving feedback, this process remains uncomfortable, however effective it might be. This participant’s dual perspective as both teacher and student is particularly noteworthy as it reminds as that however intimidating giving and receiving feedback might be for us as relatively experienced members of the academic community, it is important to place ourselves in the shoes of our students to recognize that such anxiety can be multiplied when there is a lack of experience. A similar reflection is made by another student who describes the process from the vantage point of experience:

Unfortunately I felt that some of my peers seemed uneasy in the situation when they had to give feedback, as if they feared that the person getting his/her text reviewed would be hurt by the criticism. I think it is valuable and important to

learn to take and give criticism, therefore it is important to start at this level.

Recognizing in their less experienced peers a greater degree of apprehension at the giving of feedback, this participant insightfully notes the importance of providing such learning opportunities at an early stage of university studies.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this current study was to explore students' emotional responses to the peer review process as reported through the 95 learning journal entries. What I was particularly interested in was investigating what are commonly perceived as disadvantageous reactions to the process, especially responses clustered around a sense of anxiety. My findings suggest that although the majority of students reported positive responses to the peer review process on the course in question, there was still a significant number of potentially more negative responses, which made the exploration of these worthy of further attention. Most significantly, students reported anxiety related to the giving of feedback, and this was largely the result of concerns about legitimacy and about causing unintentional offense in the delivery of feedback. A not insignificant number of students also reported anxiety in relation to being on the receiving end of evaluation.

One of the most significant conclusions to be drawn from this study is that the perceived negative responses to peer review can potentially be mediated by careful scaffolding and reflection. In this study, the scaffolding functioned primarily by promoting discussion surrounding peer review and emphasizing its constructive potential. The reflective learning journal, and formative feedback accompanying this, allowed for a greater sense of ownership of the learning process as well as enabling students to maintain a line of communication with the teacher. Students were able to raise doubts in a safe environment and receive guidance from a source of perceived authority. When students have a safe space to reflect on their anxieties, they are better able to put in place coping strategies.

This study points to several student responses which suggest that anxiety, and associated emotions, can sometimes be beneficially reconceived in a more positive light. The study also suggests that in some cases, recording reflections in writing actually paved the way to a conceptual shift in attitudes towards dealing with evaluative judgements from others. This finding is consistent with MacIntyre and Devaele's assertion that "[p]ositive emotion can help dissipate the lingering effects of negative emotional arousal, helping to promote personal resiliency in the face of difficulties" (241). Using written reflections to grapple with negative responses can help students to articulate their concerns, and thus

begin to institute changes in attitude. Recognizing the constructive benefits of peer review can also assist in enabling students to reconcile themselves to potential feelings of unease experienced.

It was also encouraging to see students actively reflecting on the transferable nature of skills developed during the peer review activities. As Keith Topping asserts, “[l]earning how to give and accept criticism, justify one’s own position, and reject suggestions are all useful, transferable social skills” (24). Topping suggests that well-thought-out scaffolding to peer assessment activities mean that “potentially negative social issues can be ameliorated and students can develop social and communication skills, negotiation and diplomacy, and teamwork skills” (24). One way in which to “ameliorate” peer review anxiety is through the use of reflection. This study, though exploratory in nature, presents initial findings which suggest that the use of a learning journal might be one way in which students can use reflective practice overcome the anxiety often associated with peer review.

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