

INTRODUCTION.

RETHINKING AND REFRAMING PEER REVIEW

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This edited collection re-examines peer review as an established practice in writing and writing-intensive courses. The chapters interrogate both the theory behind peer review and the ways in which peer review has evolved in the decades since the practice has become foundational to composition as a discipline. With the emergence of the writing process movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the introduction of peer review in the writing classroom ushered in a major paradigm shift in writing studies. To date, no single activity is more central to the writing classroom than peer review. The decades since the emergence of peer review have seen a host of different theoretical approaches to teaching writing. They include social constructivism, critical pedagogy, rhetorical, multi-modal, writing about writing, and teaching for transfer, just to name a few. Yet peer review has remained a permanent feature of each of these diverse models. It has now been so thoroughly integrated into writing classrooms not only in colleges, but to a certain extent, secondary schools, that it is difficult to imagine a writing class that does not regularly “break into groups” in order for students to share drafts of their writing and get feedback from each other.

While most instructors embrace the theory behind peer review as well as its goals, some skepticism exists about its efficacy as a practice. These reservations include a litany of complaints that all of us who teach writing and/or writing-intensive classes would recognize. From the teacher’s perspective: (1) workshop groups tend to fall apart quickly into socializing groups; (2) students don’t know how to write an effective peer review; (3) their peer reviews too often focus on lower order concerns of the essay like grammar at the expense of higher-order concerns like ideas. From the student’s perspective: (1) students don’t feel qualified to give advice to other students; (2) better writers feel resentful about getting advice from students whom they perceive as poor writers; (3) students don’t feel the comments that they get are helpful. This litany of complaints from both professors and students alike has led to skepticism about the practice with some compositionists questioning its continued importance. Others have advanced the idea that peer review be reserved for upper level university students,

who, they argue, are better able to write an effective peer review (Flynn; Jesnek). Faced with these ongoing difficulties, both students and teachers often become frustrated that the comments and conversations generated by peer review do not help them either to revise their writing or to become better writers. For the instructor, assigning peer review becomes a rote exercise; one performed out of a sense of necessity or obligation or as a way to lessen the labor of paper grading.

And yet there is still a hunger for new perspectives on this established practice. At conferences, panels on peer review consistently draw large audiences, testifying to teachers' desire for more conversation. Meanwhile, as the field of writing studies moves further into the 21st century, we grapple with new approaches to teaching writing with new technologies. Moreover, demographic shifts among college students and the nation as a whole call to us with more urgency than ever to address students with diverse educational and language backgrounds. In light of these changes to the discipline, the time is ripe for a collection of essays that assesses where peer review stands a half-century after its emergence, and that challenges us to rethink and reframe the practice going forward.

The goal of this book is to reevaluate peer review and to provoke renewed discussion from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Among the issues the chapters grapple with are: How do students' perceptions, goals, and values around peer review differ from those of their instructors? How are our peer review practices informed by theories of collaborative learning? How do rhetorical approaches enlarge and complicate our understanding of peer review? What are the practical and theoretical implications of a shift in emphasis from instruction in writing to instruction in peer review? How do emerging technologies change peer review? How do these technologies allow us to gather information about peer review, and what can that information allow us to do? How do increasing numbers of English Language Learners (ELL) challenge our models of peer review, and how should we respond to those challenges? These questions have led us to this collection.

THE HISTORY OF PEER REVIEW AS COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

It is helpful to see writing studies' engagement with peer review in terms of its history—a history that links an examination of peer review's goals to its effectiveness as a practice. From its inception, a key goal of peer review has been to have students engage in writing as a collaborative practice. Just what collaboration means, however, has been the subject of extended discussion. Over the history of peer review, collaboration has been an unstable principle, an idea that has evolved as it has been questioned.

Early advocates of peer review promoted it as a transformative practice, and collaboration was a key component of this transformation. Its advocates have not merely asserted that it results in better learning outcomes; they have argued that it changes the role of students from passive recipients of knowledge to active collaborators in its creation. The seeds for a more interactive approach to the teaching of writing generally and to peer response specifically can be traced to earlier pedagogical practices in writing from the 1960s and 1970s with the beginnings of the process movement. For process scholars, collaboration involved creating a dialog between writers and readers. Peter Elbow's 1973 book, *Writing Without Teachers*, describes a teacherless writing class where writers use each other to work out meaning and gain control over their own words. Elbow provides techniques that writers can use in order to identify and develop the important elements in a piece of writing. The key to this practice is an active collaboration between writers and readers: "The conversation with [others] helps you see the whole [draft] in better perspective, gives you new ideas, and helps you make up your own mind about what you think" (140). Elbow stresses the need to be able "to see your words through the eyes of others" (145). Proponents of the process movement like Elbow's called on students to take control of their own learning—a move towards student autonomy—and in doing so, they put writing groups at the service of the author. In their view, the goal of peer review is to help writers test out their words on readers. The role of readers is to help writers clarify their meaning and to find their voices.

However, this idea of peer review as conversation soon took on a larger social dimension. In "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" (1984), Kenneth Bruffee suggests that teachers may struggle with peer review because they fail to understand the role that conversation plays in learning. Bruffee extends his model of collaboration beyond a writer working out meaning in dialog with readers. Instead, conversation is the means through which students enter a new discourse community by learning and practicing the normal discourse of that community. In order to make peer review more effective, teachers need to shift the emphasis from editing to conversing, but they also need to shape the nature of that conversation in ways that help students enter a new community because "[t]he way they talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write" (642).

Bruffee warns that peer review "requires more than throwing students together with their peers with little or no guidance or preparation" (652). This theme that students must be guided by teachers through the peer review process has been echoed by countless scholars, and indeed, all of us are familiar with the plethora of handouts and guided response sheets that are associated with peer review. However, Bruffee's caution offers an important insight—*how* we guide students through

the process is determined by *what* our goals are. After Bruffee, those goals, particularly the nature of collaboration, would continue to be questioned.

Anne Ruggles Gere, another social constructivist frequently mentioned in tandem with Kenneth Bruffee, interrogates the nature of collaboration in her book, *Writing Groups: History, Theory and Implications* (1987). Like Bruffee, Gere insists writing be seen in terms of its “social dimension” rather than a “solo performance” (3) and that the process of collaboration “enables writers to use language as a means of becoming competent in the discourse of a given community” (75). However, Gere acknowledges the tension between the autonomy of the writer and the authority of the community. In her book, she analyzes how writing groups function in the classroom, defining them in terms of “semi-autonomous or non-autonomous” (101).

This distinction is important because it describes the way that teachers involve themselves in peer writing groups. In a “non-autonomous” group, the instructor runs the writing groups without ceding authority to students. In a semi-autonomous writing group, students, through the guidance of the instructor, can assume more authority. Gere acknowledges writing groups at the university can never be completely autonomous because of the structure of the university and the fact that they receive a grade. But writing groups can play a semi-autonomous role.

This distinction between non-autonomous and semi-autonomous groups is crucial to the evolving understanding of collaboration and its role in peer review. Like Bruffee, Gere emphasizes the need for preparation and training in creating effective peer review groups, moving the scholarly conversation about peer review towards instructor guidance and away from its early emphasis on student autonomy. As she explains, writing groups “are more likely to succeed when groups are sufficiently prepared and committed, when appropriate tasks are clear and/or agreed upon by all participants, and when debriefing or evaluation is built into the life of the group” (112). Gere’s observation that the success of peer review depends upon whether tasks are clear and agreed to by students is an important but problematic one: What is it that students are agreeing to? Whose tasks and goals are accepted by the groups?

While Gere was problematizing autonomy, writing classes continued the widespread use of peer review groups. Karen Spear’s *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes* (1988) is a good example of where the discipline’s thinking on peer response stood in the late 1980s. Like Gere, Spear is aware of the importance of autonomy and the danger that student writing groups will try to replicate the teacher’s authority rather than engage in true collaboration. Yet she remains optimistic that authentic collaboration can be achieved if teachers “accept the responsibility of teaching students how to communicate in a group

setting” (8). Spear’s call for teachers to devote significant time and energy to training students in peer review continues to resonate even today, with many compositionists suggesting that instructing students how to do peer review should become a more central (if not *the central*) focus in the writing classroom (Parfitt; Zhu; Reid). However, her emphasis on making meaning with the writer rather than appropriating the writer’s text reflects a model of peer review that is clearly rooted in process pedagogy. This model of collaboration would be debated and problematized by later scholars.

COLLABORATION: A RECONSIDERATION

One of the more recent composition scholars to consider the state of peer review is Elizabeth Flynn. In an article written in 1984, “Students as Readers of Their Classmates’ Writing: Some Implications for Peer Critiquing,” Flynn discussed the problems with peer review, arguing that students’ ability to give good feedback was hampered by the fact that they were not particularly good readers of each other’s work. The critique ended with the familiar refrain that students require more training to help them become better readers of each other’s texts—to be able to learn how “to point out gaps, inconsistencies, and irrelevancies” (127).

Twenty-seven years later, Flynn wrote a follow-up article, “Re-viewing Peer Review” (2011), that focused on research of peer review in the ensuing years. With this new project, Flynn noticed a dramatic decline in the number of articles published about peer review—a trend that began in the 1990s. Recent research, Flynn discovered, has moved into a new direction, primarily concerned with peer review for L2 learners and the use of computer-assisted peer review.

It’s interesting to speculate on the reason for this quiet period between the early 1990s and the present decade in the literature of peer review. One possibility is that as peer review became accepted practice, many teachers simply stopped questioning the theory behind it. Another possibility is that composition scholars were simply unable to find answers to the tension between student autonomy and teacher authority that was central to questions about collaboration. Yet another possibility is that as standardized testing and the call for greater accountability began to trickle down to writing programs, teachers shifted their attention towards outcomes and away from the collaborative process.

Whatever the reason, compositionists have begun to revisit earlier work in peer review to suggest possible solutions to the problems it poses. In an article entitled “Peer Response in the Composition Classroom: An Alternative Genealogy” (2007), Kory Lawson Ching revisits Gere’s 1987 book on writing groups, searching for a way to resolve the central tension of collaboration between student autonomy and teacher authority. As Ching argues, Gere’s narrative

“provides a valuable window onto the way peer response was conceptualized and promoted in the 1980s” (304). In Gere’s genealogy, according to Ching, peer response is a way to authorize students putting teacher authority on the back burner. Refusing to think in binary terms, Ching suggests a third alternative: “student/ teacher collaboration” (314). “Students,” as Ching states, “do not learn from teachers or from peers, but rather by engaging in the practices of writing and reading alongside both” (315).

By encouraging a type of “co-participation” between students and teachers, Ching sketches out the multiple benefits that can accrue with this model: namely that the student writer gets feedback from the instructor and student reviewers and that by working alongside the instructor, students learn how to give valuable feedback. Ching’s article offers a provocative and thoughtful discussion of the dichotomy between student autonomy and teacher authority—a topic that continues to be debated and informs the way that instructors think about and practice peer review.

In a recent collection on peer review, *Peer Pressure, Peer Power: Theory and Practice in Peer Review and Response for the Writing Classroom* (2014), editors Steven J. Corbett, Michelle LaFrance, and Teagan E. Decker assure readers in their introduction that the rewards of peer review “can be significant even transformative” even though they may be “difficult to reap in practice” (6). As their starting point, they frame the practice of peer review in terms of what they collectively call “collaborative peer review and response” or CPRR—an approach that places a greater value and emphasis on the collaborative aspects of peer review whereby students and instructors contribute to each other’s learning (1).

For many in the collection, this act of collaboration in peer review underscores the importance of instructor involvement. In the chapter “The Instructor-Led Peer Conference: Teachers as Participants in Peer Response,” Kory Lawson Ching expands the discussion of his 2007 article to explain how instructors can participate effectively in peer response groups by using a “small-group conference” or “group tutorial” (21). Such models, Ching argues, enlarge the audience for peer review. Students give each other feedback in this triad of reviewer, writer, and instructor, but equally important, with the instructor’s participation, students learn how to give effective feedback.

Moreover, the authors in this collection also place a greater emphasis on the instructor’s involvement with peer review, a move away from past practices that focused on student autonomy and teacher authority. Rather than an add-on activity to essay writing, they consider peer review to be a central component of a writing course, one that is taught and developed throughout the course term. As E. Shelley Reid contends in her chapter “Peer Review for Peer Review’s Sake: Resituating Peer Review Pedagogy,” for peer review to be more successful,

instructors “need to spend proportionately more time teaching it” (218): in other words, to think of peer review as a genre that can be taught.

The Corbett collection ultimately advances two primary assertions: the importance placed on the value of peer review as a collaborative venture between instructors and students and on the centrality of peer review to the writing process. In their reconsideration of peer review, the authors maintain that collaborative learning forms the basis of the practice for both instructors and students. With its focus as “both a theoretical and practical sourcebook,” the Corbett collection of essays provides writing instructors, writing centers, and writing tutors with a valuable guide for understanding and for teaching peer review (2).

Rethinking Peer Review: Critical Reflections on a Pedagogical Practice extends the conversation initiated in Corbett’s collection. As the discipline of writing studies changes, so do our ideas about how we conceptualize and reconceptualize practices like peer review. Such moments offer teacher/scholars an opportunity to reflect on the purpose and goals of this foundational practice and its interplay with new theoretical approaches. While collaborative learning has always been at the heart of peer review, new approaches and theories of writing have increasingly complicated this idea. Collaboration no longer means the simple give and take between writer and readers that it did in peer review’s earliest iterations. Contemporary scholars emphasize collaboration as a more complex practice embedded in a particular rhetorical context and complicating issues of agency and autonomy. In the eyes of many scholars, it also requires devoting significant time to training students to understand how peer review is situated within the dynamics of a classroom, an institution, and even, in some cases, the larger culture.

This collection, then, attempts to situate peer review in a new era for writing studies. While peer review undeniably has its roots in process pedagogy, contemporary scholarship grapples with the assumptions and practices of that early history. As Nora McCook writes in this collection, “even with many of [process pedagogy’s] instructional practices still in place, there are new vantage points through which to utilize peer review” (130). As the field of writing studies has become more rhetorically focused, the question of how writer, reviewer, and instructor are embedded in a specific rhetorical situation has become one of those vantage points, as exemplified by several of our chapters.

The cultural and academic environment in which we teach has changed as much as our theories and our pedagogies. Despite the call from some scholars to value peer review as a process that teaches students critical thinking rather than as a tool that results in better papers, educators today also face demands for accountability that can explain how writing skills will transfer to other college courses as well as to future employers. These competing demands force us to repurpose peer review in ways that demonstrate relevance to both students

and administrators. (See, for example, Nora McCook's focus on peer review as a method of teaching "soft skills" needed in the workplace.) Additionally, demographic trends of the past decade challenge and force us to rethink how well past approaches and assumptions currently work with today's students. And finally, technology, accelerated by changes during the covid years, continues to shape our field in ways that greatly impact how students practice peer review. All of these are issues tackled by the writers in this book.

Peer review, we want to suggest, has moved into a new era. In addressing this new era, we have found it useful to divide our collection into four parts. The first addresses the fundamental challenges of peer review and urges us to reconsider and re-address some basic premises. The next three parts consider theoretical and practical changes in writing instruction that have reframed our thinking about peer review: the ways in which rhetorical approaches enlarge and complicate our understanding of peer review, the ways in which diverse language communities necessitate educational change and help to reshape former peer review practices, and the ways in which technology informs different aspects of the peer review process—all of which make peer review both an exciting and challenging part of the writing classroom.

PEER REVIEW: EVALUATING THE CHALLENGES

The chapters in this part evaluate some of the challenges of peer review and the ways in which it has been put into practice. In their chapter, "Teachers' Beliefs about the Language of Peer Review: Survey-Based Evidence," researchers Anson, Anson, and Andrews explore why "faculty either gravitate toward or shy away from using peer review." For their study, they surveyed close to 500 instructors to examine their perceptions about the practice of peer review. Their research points out that the language we use to describe peer feedback reveals an underlying disjunction about what teachers value and concludes that peer feedback means different things in different types of institutions. Though the results of their study demonstrate that the practice of peer review varies widely throughout colleges and universities depending on numerous variables, the authors nonetheless agree that peer review needs to remain an important part of the writing curriculum.

In his chapter, "Resisting Theory: The Wisdom of the Creative Writing Workshop," Bob Mayberry analyzes the difference between the creative writing workshop model versus the peer review model typically used in first-year composition courses. Mayberry maps out the changes in composition studies that moved away from the discipline's earlier expressionist roots to one that became "more a professional, research-based discipline" (47). In his chapter, Mayberry

urges instructors to reconsider the creative writing workshop model with its focus on “learning about writing” (56). He argues persuasively that the instructor’s job is to “facilitate *their* conversation” allowing students to cast themselves as engaged “writers” working in concert with other writers (58).

Christopher Weaver’s chapter, “A Troubled Practice: Three Models of Peer Review and The Problems Underlying Them,” argues that teachers’ dissatisfaction with peer review stems largely from the problematic nature of the goals underlying the practice. He examines three different models of peer review: the collaborative model, the proxy model, and the disciplinary/professional model. Despite their differences, each model holds out the same promise of peer review as a transformative practice. However, this promise runs up against a hard truth: that students, at best, struggle to understand the transformation being asked of them, and at worst, they resist it. Weaver argues that freeing peer review from the expectation of transformation allows us to make space in the writing class for its more attainable benefits.

PEER REVIEW: RHETORICALLY SITUATED

In this part, the chapters examine the complex relationship between the student whose writing is being reviewed, the peer reviewer, and the classroom teacher. Coming from a variety of different perspectives, the authors argue that the success of peer review depends on how the practice is rhetorically situated. Kay Halasek, in her chapter, “Interrogating Peer Review as ‘Proxy’: Reframing Peer Response as Connected Practice,” views the failure of peer review as a result of positioning the reviewer as proxy for teacher feedback, where students mimic what the teacher expects to hear. Making a distinction between peer review and peer response, Halasek argues for the more expansive approach of peer response. Situated within the framework of “connective practice,” peer response is repositioned as a genre, one that becomes an integral part of the writing course.

Courtney Stanton’s chapter, “Peer Persuasion: An Ethos-Based Theory of Identification and Audience Awareness,” shifts the focus from the writer deciding how to respond to a review to the reviewer understanding the review as an act of persuasion. In a provocative move, Stanton argues that the instructor should not be displaced from a central role in the peer review process. Rather, the instructor needs to become an active contributor along with the other students. Doing so sets up the “concept of reviewer-instructor identification.” Through this identification, peer reviewers can be empowered by borrowing some of the “ethos” of the instructor. Ultimately, such a move on behalf of the instructor enables students to grasp the sense of audience in its broadest sense, creating an implicit trust between student reviewers and the instructor, all of whom are working together.

In “Positioning Peer Review for Transfer: Authentic Audiences for Career Readiness and Workplace Communication,” Nora McCook argues that the model of peer review that emerged out of student-centered pedagogy has been ineffective precisely because it has failed to position itself as a rhetorically valuable tool beyond the classroom setting. To replace that model, McCook looks to transfer pedagogy, using backward and forward reflection in order to reframe peer review as a workplace practice. As she explains, this type of reflection helps students “to develop precisely the types of useful, collaborative workplace skills that they will encounter with their colleagues after college.”

PEER REVIEW: CULTIVATING INCLUSIVENESS

This next part looks at the experiences that both native and non-native students face when they feel unsure about their writing abilities. Ellen Turner, in “Peer Review and the Benefits of Anxiety in the Academic Writing Classroom,” examines how anxiety about peer review can be a significant obstacle for non-native speakers of English. In a counterintuitive move, Turner challenges the premise that anxiety must necessarily “always [be] negative,” explaining that it can also have a “positive effect, particularly amongst non-native speakers of English” (162, 165). To overcome individual student anxiety, Turner assigns a “reflective learning journal,” where students write about their experience of peer review “before, during, and after feedback sessions” (169, 171). Turner’s research notes a decrease in anxiety through the use of the learning journal with an attendant increase of student interest in peer review.

In the chapter “Multimodal Peer Review: Fostering Inclusion in Mixed Level College Classrooms with ELL Learners,” researcher Beth Kramer gives voice to the unique “challenges of mixed level composition classrooms.” Like the students that Turner discusses, ELL students also experience “anxiety about their performance and skill levels.” The question becomes how to work with a mixed group of students that include ELL students and native speakers who are at different levels while simultaneously challenging both groups when doing peer review. For Kramer, the answer has been to assign more frequent lower-stakes assignments of peer review to decrease anxiety while increasing social collaboration and to introduce the use of podcasts as a means to increase “oral reflection.”

PEER REVIEW: THE PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY

This last part looks at the role that technology plays in the practice of peer review. The discussion begins with demonstrating the effectiveness of putting peer review online. In “Leveling the Playing Field for ELL Students: The Case

for Moving Peer Review to an Online Environment,” Vicki Pallo, like Turner and Kramer, acknowledges the anxiety that ELL students confront when taking a writing course, which is especially true when students are called upon to do peer review. To overcome their unease, Pallo advocates moving peer review online asynchronously. While instructors might be reluctant to put their students in such a position, Pallo rigorously challenges that notion explaining that the asynchronous online environment affords students opportunities, including more time to read and write than is otherwise available to them in a face-to-face course. This ultimately leads to greater student participation.

Phoebe Jackson’s chapter, “Learning from Peer Review Online: Changing the Pedagogical Emphasis,” examines research on peer review from the field of education. Unlike compositionists, education scholars start with the premise that peer review is a beneficial practice and that student writers can learn from *providing* a peer review. This change in pedagogical emphasis shifts the focus from a concern about outcomes (the student’s comments) to one that zeroes in on what students can learn when *doing* peer review. Jackson further argues that the online environment can better enhance and reinforce the learning that takes place for students when doing peer review, helping to build their own spontaneous discourse communities.

This part ends with Nick Carbone’s “The Potential of Peer Review Software That Focuses on the Review, not the Draft,” taking us into wholly new territory: the promise of peer review software. As Carbone explains, because peer review software aggregates all student comments, it makes them visible to both students and the instructor. This visibility works on multiple levels, allowing, for example, students to “see how their feedback is used and how it compares to feedback given by other reviewers.” The aggregation of student comments, moreover, gives instructors detailed material to better advise students and discuss different aspects of the actual peer review. At its best, this software helps to showcase the importance of peer review as an integral part of the writing process.

Today, almost half a century removed from its origins, peer review remains a mainstay in most writing courses from high school to college. We hope this collection provokes new thinking about this foundational practice for those teachers who already use peer review successfully, those who use peer review but might harbor misgivings or frustrations with it, and for graduate students about to embark on a teaching career. Taken together, the chapters in this collection offer all practitioners involved in composition studies and the teaching of writing an opportunity to reconsider and possibly reconceptualize peer review. The authors begin with the premise that peer review is an integral and essential component of any writing course and then go on to provide multiple ways to re-envision and rethink it from a various perspectives. They include such topics

as the intersections of rhetoric, student inclusiveness, and technology with peer review, bringing new considerations to a long-standing practice. In so doing, the chapters provoke a renewed discussion of peer review, one that is long overdue, from both theoretical and practical perspectives. All of this, we hope, will lead to further enhancement and development of an essential practice and a continuing dialogue about the importance of peer review as a pedagogical practice in all writing courses.

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