

Peer Review: Successful from the Start

By E. Shelley Reid, George Mason University, Virginia
ereid1@gmu.edu

A year ago I was sitting at a conference lunch table with nine other college and high school writing teachers when the discussion turned to peer review: students evaluating each other's essay drafts. I was surprised when one professor's comment, "I no longer assign peer review of student essays, because the poor results aren't worth the class time it takes," was immediately assented to by six other people at the table. I asked the group what they meant by "poor results." Most of them agreed it was the quality of students' comments on each other's essays—at best vague and unhelpful and often misleading or incorrect.

I understand that frustration, yet I have seen enough evidence, in composition scholarship and in my own classes, to be convinced that the *whole process* of peer review—from the first mention of it in a syllabus to the final use that students make of peers' comments—is a crucial part of learning to write better. Furthermore, I do believe that it's possible and important to help undergraduates learn to better read and respond to their peers' writing.

Faculty who evaluate peer-review sessions based on *multiple* criteria, not just the quality of student comments, can find themselves more satisfied with the process, more able to explain its value to students, and more interested in developing ways to incorporate it across the curriculum. In the sections below, I describe six benefits that peer review can bring to writing education, regardless of—or, one hopes, in addition to—the production of useful student commentary.

Three by getting ready: Merely by requiring a peer-review session, I can address three key learning goals before the class meeting starts. First, by assigning a peer-review draft, I broaden the audience to whom student writers are responsible: students must at least consider that some-

one besides The Teacher will see their writing. Second, students are required to produce a draft earlier than they might otherwise have done. Third, I have indicated to students that I will (and they should) value students' input as readers of each other's writing. Not all students will take these learning opportunities to heart: some may ignore the invitation to perform well for their peers; some may not revise their initial drafts; some may continue to doubt the value of "average reader" responses. But many students will reap these benefits.

Two for showing up: Having begun to read other writers' drafts, students can benefit in two ways before they write a single comment. As they see what their peers have created in response to the assignment, they can boost their own confidence in having written fairly well and/or see options for writing differently, if not better. Moreover, in asking them to consider questions about a peer's essay, I reinforce the idea that writing is the result of the writer's choices—which can be controlled and modified—rather than the result of an inspired, immutable vision. Confidence, control, and the ability to envision changes are crucial qualities of all good writers. I reinforce these learning opportunities by asking students to write reflectively afterward to describe something they saw in a peer's draft that could help them in their own writing, as well as something they saw that they don't think would work in their essays.

One in checking the bottom line: Finally, I can use my peer-review guide to help students check each other's essays—and, indirectly but more reliably, their own—against my assignment criteria. Questions that ask students to label places where peer-authors include vivid sensory details, integrate quotations smoothly, address counterarguments, or write an engaging title to the essay, for instance, invariably prompt students to ask me, "Were we supposed to include quotations?" or "What do you mean, 'counterarguments'?" Students who engage in such

an active review of the assignment expectations, especially *after* they have completed a draft, increase their awareness of writing as a negotiation between the intent of the writer and the needs of the audience.

At the end of even a very-first peer-review session, then, I know—without looking at students' comments—that I have helped many students make progress toward meeting important learning goals. I share this vision of peer review with my students as well, discussing what they may have gained from the experience, whether or not the most visible outcome—peer commentary—meets their expectations. Thus even when students aren't ready to produce insightful and constructive feedback, I believe teachers and students can find satisfaction in the time they invest in the review activity, as long as they keep in mind all the ways that peer review can be successful right from the start.

Recommended Resources on Designing Effective Peer Review Assignments

"How Can I Get the Most Out of Peer Review?" *An Introduction to Writing Across the Curriculum*. 1997-2003. Kate Kiefer and Colorado State University. June 9, 2006. <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop2j.cfm>

Kischner, Michael. "Should Teachers Comment on Drafts of Student Essays? or Making Time for Peer Review." *Assessment in and of Collaborative Learning*. Washington Center Evaluation Committee, Evergreen State University. June 9, 2006. www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/acl/b4.html

Woods, Peggy M. "Moving Beyond 'This Is Good' in Peer Response." *Practice in Context: Situating the Work of Writing Teachers*. Ed. Cindy Moore and Peggy O'Neill. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002. 187-195. 🍓