“Peer Review in a Writing Intensive English Course” – Dr. Catherine Craft-Fairchild

When Dr. Erika Scheurer suggested that St. Thomas develop a panel for the International Writing Across the Curriculum conference in gorgeous Savannah, Georgia, I immediately volunteered, happy to talk about writing in that beautiful historic spot. But after Erika listed me for the panel, I began to wonder what I could offer a group of writing experts. I was certain that many of the people in the audience would, like many of us, teach Writing Intensive courses that gave “students substantive and direct instruction in the writing process….Such courses employ pedagogical approaches attuned to student skill levels and designed to emphasize writing as a process, a practice, and a product.” What in my pedagogy might be useful to share with others?

One element of the teaching of writing that has posed many problems and required much thought and re-working is peer editing; my approach to this teaching tool has evolved greatly over my 24 years in the classroom. Stealing liberally from generous colleagues and garnering feedback from Dr. Chris Anson, our WAC seminar leader, I have developed a peer-editing process that works around at least a few of the difficulties in order to enhance student learning and encourage student investment in revision.

In his article for The English Journal, “Revision Workshops: An Alternative to Peer Editing Groups” (76.3 [March 1987]), Michael Graner outlines the “limitations of peer editing,” citing four areas of significant difficulty: (1) “The first limitation is that student writers lack the skill to make effective evaluations….Critics…complain that peer editing is nothing more than the blind leading the blind with unskilled editors guiding inexperienced writers in a process neither understands well”; (2) “These critics cite a related problem; students often feel uncomfortable making negative criticisms of peers' work, and editing sessions can degenerate into recitations of mutual compliments, unsupported by content”; (3) “Another drawback of peer editing is a practical consideration; students may come to class unprepared or uncommitted. If students do not prepare initial drafts or do so carelessly, the peer review session will be valueless”; (4) “Since exchanging information is the basis of peer editing, several conversations are occurring simultaneously, and it is virtually impossible for the teacher to guarantee that these discussions do not become small talk or social chit-chat.”

Chris Anson summarizes the issue by saying, “Many teachers try peer response and revision groups only to abandon them because they don’t think the students use the time wisely and/or because they don’t see sufficient evidence of improvements in the students’ revised drafts. These problems with peer revision groups come not from limitations of the method but from how they’re set up, orchestrated, and evaluated.” While no process can eliminate the difficulties inherent in peer-editing, I agree with Chris that there are ways to avoid some potential pitfalls. Much of the process I use involves holding students accountable by having them write about others’ and their own writing, and assigning a grade to these responses; another component involves making strategic teaching interventions at key spots.

The peer-editing assignment for my classes requires students to bring in rough drafts to share during the class period before the writing groups meet. Students know that they will have to fill out a peer-response worksheet for both of the drafts they will read and we, as a class, will have gone over sample papers and worksheets to prepare them for the process. Students are also
asked to share their own “writer’s memo” with their peers, supplementing my questions by asking about areas of concern they have that they wish their writing group members to address. Reading the drafts at home, rather than during a class period, and knowing that 10% of their final grade will result from the work they do on peer-editing encourages students to focus and try to address the questions asked, questions that focus on content, not on grammar. Borrowing liberally from the work of Dr. Todd Lawrence, I have tried to make the peer-review worksheet fairly brief and straightforward so that the task doesn’t appear too daunting. I have found that students generally have more to say than the worksheet provides space for, so they also write on the drafts and turn these in as well.

On the day the writing groups meet, students share the peer-response worksheets with each writer and also have a conversation about each draft, explaining the additional things they have to say that they couldn’t or didn’t have time to explain in writing. Again, because students have, of necessity, put time and work into the “homework,” they usually have things they want to address with each writer, so the class time generally is used productively. I circulate through the writing groups during these conversations to check progress and address questions.

When students turn in their final drafts to me, they also turn in a revision memo where they are asked about the peer-editing process. This is the place for students to comment on the peer feedback they received and offer suggestions for making that feedback more helpful and detailed. I synthesize student comments and share them with the class so that each time we engage in peer-editing, the process can improve. I also collect and read the peer-response worksheets, and give each peer-editor feedback on his or her work.

“Perhaps the single most important element in successful peer revision sessions is what you have the students do,” said Chris Anson to our WAC seminar; “Left to their own devices, they may hunt for errors, provide only disingenuous praise, or not think critically about the papers at all. Intervention in the form of a set of questions or foci is crucial….Accountability is crucial.” I have tried to build these elements into my peer-editing process and, for the moment, I’m satisfied, though I can see myself modifying and overhauling the process several more times before retirement. As for our audience in Savannah, I’ve been in touch with several people to share my methods and hear about their process—Erika’s panel was indeed a very good idea!
Purpose: Why is it important to get feedback from your peers? Dr. Erika Scheurer offers two good answers:

1. Writing is a social activity. Most of the writing you will do in your working life (memos, reports, briefs, articles, etc.) will NOT be written the way you write most school papers—all alone, quickly, the night before....Other people will be much more involved in the process (even co-writing) than you are used to right now. I think it is never too early for you to experience writing in this "real world" context.

2. Most importantly, however, giving and receiving feedback makes your writing better and makes you a better writer. So much of writing involves anticipating what your readers will think and feel in reaction to your words. Getting that reaction while you are in the process of writing helps you to build your thinking with other viewpoints (making for more complex, developed writing), to know where you may be confusing readers, and—most important!—to know where you have succeeded in engaging their interest.

Process:

1. During the class period before the writing groups meet: Bring in one copy of your rough draft for each member of your writing group. The Writer’s Harbrace Handbook notes that, “When submitting a draft for review, you can increase your chances of getting the kind of help you want by introducing your work and indicating what your concerns are” (p. 97). So, along with each draft, include a brief “writer’s memo” that indicates to your group members your strengths (“those parts of the draft that you are confident about”) and your concerns (those parts of the draft you would particularly like readers to focus on; “let your readers know exactly what kind of help you want from them…[I]ndicating your concerns tells readers that it is safe to discuss them with you,” Harbrace, p. 98). Collect one rough draft from each member to take home yourself!

2. At home: After carefully reading each draft, fill out one peer-response worksheet (attached to these instructions) for each writer. Offering useful feedback is a challenging activity. Try to keep in mind that your primary task is not to grade the paper in front of you but is, instead, to offer information to the writer about your reactions to his/her writing. Providing useful information means going into some detail—try to be specific by drawing attention to passages in the paper that illustrate what you mean. As in other areas of life, the golden rule applies here: treat the author as you would wish to be treated! Try to give direct, thoughtful feedback worded tactfully! Dr. Todd Lawrence expresses it this way: “Be honest in your assessment of each other’s writing. You are not going to help someone by sugar-coating the truth or holding back what you really think about their paper or the ideas in it. Don’t be less than forthright because you think you might hurt someone’s feelings. On the other hand, keep your criticism constructive. Remember, we are not critiquing each other; we are critiquing each other’s papers.”

3. On the day that the writing groups meet: Bring in the peer-response worksheets to give to each writer! The next step is for the group to have a productive conversation about each writer’s paper. Since you’ve read each other’s work carefully, you probably have several ideas for each person that you didn’t have time to explain in writing—now is the time to collaborate and offer suggestions! Begin with one person’s draft, focusing on the elements that work well, then moving on to those that do not work so well. The group members should push each other to be as detailed as possible (e.g. “Why were you confused there?”); the author should be sure to stress the questions/issues that he or she is concerned about. Dr. Lawrence writes, “this is your time to take advantage of a test audience. Ask questions of your group and use them to help you understand the ways in which your paper is doing the things you want it to and how it is failing to accomplish what you thought it would.” Try to pace yourselves so that each paper receives roughly equal time.
4. The writer now faces the challenge of revising his or her draft in light of the feedback received: “After your reviewers have finished…you are responsible for evaluating the responses you received—rejecting those that would take you in a direction you do not want to pursue and honoring those that would help you to fulfill your purpose. Remind yourself that you are the author of the draft in question and that you get the final say about whatever goes into an essay with your name on it. And it’s a rare writer who pleases everyone” (Harbrace, p. 99).
PEER-RESPONSE WORKSHEET
The author is responsible for handing in this sheet with his or her final draft!!!

Author’s name: _____________________________________
Writing group member’s name: ________________________________________

What is the writer’s thesis or main/controlling idea? (A thesis is “a single idea, clearly focused and specifically stated, that grows out of your exploration of a subject,” Harbrace.) Try to restate the thesis in your own words. If the thesis is not immediately apparent, what appears to stand out as the central focus, or best idea, after you have read the entire essay?

Does the thesis fulfill the requirements of the assignment?  Y  N
Does the thesis offer a sufficiently unified, narrow, and specific focus for the whole essay?  Y  N

If you answered “No” to either of the above, can you help the writer develop a better thesis from material in other parts of his/her paper?

Originality: Did the writer tell you something you didn't already know just by reading the class texts?  Y  N
(An effective essay “develops an authentic, fresh insight that challenges the reader’s thinking. The paper shows a complex, curious mind at work. Caution….’fresh’ should not be confused with ‘startling’”—Dr. Michael Mikolajczak.)

Coherence: Do all the paragraphs of the essay relate to the thesis and to each other?  Y  N
If not, is there any way to connect the material that seems disconnected?
**Organization:** Does the structure of the essay make sense—was it smooth and easy to follow? Were points made in a logical order, and made only once rather than repeated?  

Y   N

**Textual evidence:** Did the writer cite the class texts fully enough so that you could readily see what he/she based his/her observations upon?  

Y   N

(“Through telling detail, the writer helps the reader experience what she/he is saying”—Dr. Michael Mikolajczak.)

Does the writer make clear the relevance of the passage(s) chosen to the point being made? Y   N

Please provide the writer with two additional pieces of textual evidence that would support her/his point that she/he didn’t think of!

1.

2.

What has the writer done a particularly good job on?

What should be the writer’s **top priorities** as he or she revises? Please be as specific as possible and try to address any concerns or questions the writer him/herself asked for help on in the writer’s memo.

Note: Comments on the worksheet should NOT focus on grammar. As you read the drafts, if you notice errors in punctuation, grammar, or spelling, you may wish to mark them on the draft so that the writer can consider them later, but do not spend time here addressing editorial issues—doing this could leave a writer feeling that you are not interested in the content of what she/he has to say!
Revision memo

(Adapted from the work of Dr. Abigail Davis.)
Please attach a revision memo to your final draft!

Name:

Essay title:

1. Summarize the comments and suggestions your peers made about your first draft. Was the feedback helpful? Do you have suggestions for your team that might improve their feedback for you? (e.g. it would have been helpful if s/he had done the following….)

2. What did you change in moving from the first draft to the final draft? Which changes were prompted by the feedback from your writing group? Which were ones you made using your own judgment?"

3. If you had the time to revise your paper again, what elements would you work on?

4. What do you think the strongest aspect of your writing in this paper? What insights about your writing or process of writing resulted from working on this assignment?

5. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything I haven’t included in this revision memo that you would like to discuss?