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### **Responding to Peer Response: A Look into the World of Peer Response & Revision**

As teachers, we all talk about peer response during the writing process. Most of us are considering using peer response as an activity within our classroom; however, we have also all been in situations where peer response is either ineffective or fails altogether. What I will explore is whether or not peer response really works, how it can be effective, different types of response that can be used, and what makes for successful peer responses.

#### ***Setting your classroom up so peer response is possible.***

Within your classroom, there needs to be a sense of trust, not only between teacher and student, but also between the students themselves. On top of trust, the students must have a clear understanding as to what peer response can and should do for them, as well as what is expected out of each student during the process. Without this, activities, especially something like peer revision, do not go over well and the students do not completely benefit from them. Therefore, before even thinking about doing a collaboration exercise such as peer revision, trust must be formed...but how?

First, peer response or other collaborative activities should not come into play until the students are comfortable with the teacher as well as each other. Trying to work peer response into a classroom that has only been together for a month will most likely fail. The students need to be a writing community, knowing each other's interests, etc... One way to do this is to incorporate activities early in the semester, which allow students to voice their interests, hobbies, and passions. By doing this, students who may not realize they have anything in common with their peers will see the lines of difference fade. With these type of activities, as well as time, students will become a community and it will be easier for them to work with each other. Many times students feel other students will judge them or their work during peer revision. This makes them nervous going into the group and because of their self-consciousness they may not offer good advice or helpful information to the other students in the group whose work they are actually responding too (Spear, 123). One way to avoid this is by gaining their trust within the classroom.

Another way to break down the anxiety is to show students prior to actually running a peer response session how things can be done and what ways to attempt peer revision work best. "Students also need training in how to convey their responses to one another's writing. Without some guidance and specific response strategies, students may play it safe and stick with superficial comments such as 'I liked it' and 'it was pretty good'". (Olson, 271). A way to do this before actually performing peer response is to have the students participate in a mock peer response activity, having students role play showing effective and ineffective responses and ways of participating.

Nancie Atwell does something similar to this, having a day of role-play showing effective peer response and then showing ineffective peer response the next day. Atwell says, "Peers need instruction, demonstrations, reminders, and time if they're to get better at responding to each other's writing, just as their teachers do" (159). Although this is a very successful way to start

the year, showing the students what to do during peer response, Atwell suggests going back to the role-playing throughout the year as the students work on peer response.

When starting peer response, putting students into groups is the first dilemma. Deciding if students can make their own groups or if the teacher should create the groups, depends on the make up of the class as well as the class community. In having the students choose their own groups, they decide with whom they are comfortable. As stated before, students at times dread peer response, because they are not comfortable having their peers, let alone with peers whom they are not friends with, read their writing. As a teacher's assistant for a freshman college composition course, I saw this happening many times during peer response. Students were forced to work with peers they may not have ever conversed with prior to the activity. They gave vague and generic responses and were not engaged in the peer response. It is also known many times when students group with friends, not as much work happens and students are too afraid to be judgmental of their friends. This means, sometimes making groups beforehand can be more beneficial. It will depend on the classroom dynamics as to whether to assign groups or let the students choose. Hopefully while participating in peer response the students will not have time to "gab," since they will have a specific task and structure at hand to follow.

In teacher Jane Schaffer's class, "[they] prefer to assign pairs ourselves because this eliminates students' fear of not being picked by a classmate"(84). She explains her goal in pairing is to avoid the dread students often associate with peer response (84). They worry about having someone else read their work at all or getting a hurtful reaction from a classmate. "Anything we can do to lessen their anxiety is essential and appreciated by the students" (84). Besides fear, students can learn more about each other if not with the same group all the time.

"Rather than allowing students to form their own groups, which produces homogeneous [groups], teachers can form [groups] by assigning a diverse set of students to each group" (Smagorinsky, 37). Students, then, can gain insight into others' perspectives and ideas they normally would not receive in their group of friends.

So we've got our students into groups, now what happens?

***Peer Response can be done in numerous ways, depending on your students or preference.***

Although many of us [teachers] have done routine peer revision in our own classroom experiences, which can consist of getting into groups of three and reading each other's papers, and commenting on them, we need to realize there are many ways to attempt peer response. For each individual class, certain ways will work better; this is for us to figure out on our own. Within this, I would like to offer different ways a teacher can use peer revision.

Carol Booth Olson calls one approach that can be used *Finding the Golden Lines*. This can be most effective in beginning peer response sessions. This strategy, which Olson learned from Bob Tierney, Bay Area Writing Project teacher/consultant, "involves reading the draft with a yellow highlighter and marking the words or phrases that are especially memorable, vivid, thought-provoking, or touching" (271). By doing this activity, students can find the strengths in the author. This activity, instead of correcting or pointing out students mistakes/flaws, which can happen many times during the peer revision/response activity, encourages students and shows the positive element of their individual writing process.

Along with this process, Olson incorporates what she calls the *Elbow Method*. She developed this using the guidelines Peter Elbow developed in *Writing without Teachers* (271). Within this activity there are four sections the student would address. These are 1) Pointing - pointing to words or phrases that stick in one's mind as being especially vivid or memorable. 2)

Summarizing – zeroing in on key ideas, writing a sentence or word that summarizes what the writer is saying or a word that captures the essence of what is being presented. 3) Telling- tells writer what happened as reader read the piece. Explaining what they understood or if they got confused. 4) Showing – (this is the most difficult for students at times) readers compare the writing to something else, music, weather, color, a body part, a type of art, etc... Showing lets the writer know what kind of picture they are making for the reader.

Another type of peer response can be done in a *four-day process*, which may work well for first time peer response activities during the year. This four-day sequence used by Jane Schaffer, teacher, who on the first day “takes one period to do a sample peer response with the class using a model essay” (Schaffer, 82). She feels the students need availability to A-quality peer response before even attempting their own. The class reads the essay and they model together types of questions a peer responder could ask. She tries to have the class specifically avoid Yes/No questions. During this activity Schaffer encourages students to write the questions down from the board to their notes, to use as models when they do their own responding. On day two, students pair up. They write their name as well as their partner’s name, marking which is the writer and which is the responder, to avoid confusion later. They then practice the idea of questioning based on what they did the previous day. Day three is the same with different partners, so the students can get different perspectives. Finally, on day four, students go back to their own draft, with the response questions from their peers and try to answer the questions, adding new or more descriptive information to their papers.

Another form of peer response is called the *PQP technique* (Praise-Question-Polish) a technique formed by Gloria A Neubert and Sally J McNelis used both in high school and college classrooms. They found “this technique helps students focus on the task at hand as well as maintain a positive attitude toward the critique process” (52). Neubert and McNelis recommend forming groups of two to five. The students take turns reading their paper aloud as the other students follow along with their own copies. “This oral reading helps the writer to hear the piece in another voice and to independently identify possible changes” (52). What is included within this peer response is the following: *Praise* – What is good about this writing? What should not be changed? Why is it good? *Question* – As a reader, what do you not understand? *Polish* – What specific suggestions for improvement can you make?

Atwell gives another suggestion to peer response. She calls her activity a peer writing or response conference. She suggests working with peer response at the beginning of the year. She makes one list with her class, the principles of conferring. Within making the list Atwell talks to her students about how the writer explains what he/she wants, then reads the writing aloud, and finally how responders listen, ask questions about things they don’t understand or would like to know more about and give the writer the specific feedback he/she asked for. She also uses a “peer writing conference record” (505). On this sheet there is a section for the writer, which asks for information from him/her regarding what help he/she want. This can include ideas, language, organization, etc... This section is to help the reader direct his/her responses. The second section is for the reader. Advice given to help the reader is as follows: Ask what the writer needs help with, listen as the writer reads and try to understand and then give feedback, ask writer about areas you do not understand or have confusions with, ask what the writer plans to do next, and finally give this record of the conference to the writer (505).

Now the students have different ways to achieve successful peer response. The job is not done yet, the teacher plays an important role during the peer response process.

### ***Teacher's role during peer response***

Okay, so the students successfully peer responded, now what? Should the teacher look over what students wrote? If so, what needs to happen? Although student feedback is usually the easiest way to see if peer revision/response is successful, the teacher may also want to have the student turn in their peer responses with their final draft, or at least a working draft, enabling the teacher to see what peer response did for each student. This also allows the teacher to see how each student is performing peer response. After viewing these, the teacher will be able to take notice of what is working, what is not, and who comprehends and understands the activity. However, while the students are performing peer responses, the teacher does play a role. "First, teachers sit in on group sessions to determine how efficiently the groups are operating" (Barron, 29). Even while the students are participating, not only are teachers involved, but also they are able to see how things are going and this can act as part of the evaluation of the process. According to Barron, during these group sit-ins the teacher will most likely be asked for help, direction, and/or advice. He suggests acting like another member of the group at this point, this way the teacher will not take over the group, but can help (29). Another way Barron suggests teacher involvement is to "make individual conference time available for students who request it" (29).

### ***Successful peer responses and alternatives to peer response***

So, now there are choices of what to do during peer response, how to make peer response obtainable, and what to do afterwards. But does this all really work? What exactly are qualities of successful response groups? Barron offers what he believes "successful groups require certain conditions" (30). First he believes the group must tolerate and respect other members in the group. Second, he feels students need to do some work outside of class. Meaning, the students should come to class with revised drafts to the best of their ability, so "the group will be able to devote its time to what the writers could not accomplish on their own" (30). Third, he feels the group will be successful if, during the time they meet, the group remains focused on their task. Fourth, he believes students need to understand that they need to give suggestions, rather than ultimatums. Finally, he believes a group will be successful if they "indicate both the strengths and areas where revision is needed" (33). All of these qualities are determined and carried out by the groups. The teacher can model and encourage, but in the end, the students are the ones who determine if their peer response experience is successful and useful.

There are also alternatives to doing peer response within the classroom, for students to be aware of effective writing and improve their writing techniques and abilities. As known, most of us learn the most when we teach. . .Judy A. Hughes uses this idea with her junior and senior students. She explains that even though she uses and is enthusiastic about peer response, it "did not ensure that students would conscientiously rewrite their papers" (41). She then came up with an idea and involved sophomore classes in the same school. She had her students work with the younger class, leading those students through the writing process. Through teaching other students her juniors and seniors were able to show their understanding and knowledge of the writing process and then later, apply this to their own writing.

Overall, peer response is something most teachers want to use and it is also something many teachers have problems with, within the classroom. We need to help bring a trusting relationship into our classrooms to help make peer response possible and successful. We also need to see what type of peer response works best for our own classes. Some classes can use any peer response activity successfully and some will prefer to use one specific type. Using all options can help find a way to work with yours students and see them succeed. We have our

own roles to play as the teacher during peer response to help make it run smoothly. If we do all of these tasks, we should have a group of students, as a class, who are able to successfully learn and teach from each other, while becoming better, more efficient writers.

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