Teaching and Using Peer Response in the SWS Classroom

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Why Peer Response?

Peer response activities are an effective active learning pedagogy for SWS courses.[1] They are collaborative processes whereby writers learn from other writers, both through the act of giving and receiving feedback. Knowing that they will have to share their writing with peers can be an incentive for students to work harder on their drafts, harder than they would have if merely submitting their writing to the teacher.

While many students may think that peer response is only about getting advice to fix their own papers, students can also become better at analyzing the needs of their own writing through the experience of responding to the writing of others. It can help students to see alternatives to how they have addressed the writing context of the assignment. It also can give them a better sense of how a reader will react to what has been written. During those times when a teacher's recommendations are not getting through to a writer, students will often understand and respond to the same advice coming from a peer.

When directed toward specific goals, peer response can also be used to emphasize individual overall writing objectives for the course. For example, the teacher can plan peer response activities that focus on writing strategies discussed in a recent lesson. Students can practice applying specific writing skills through giving feedback. And they can learn where they might not have been applying those skills in their own writing.

Consequently, the GVSU University Writing Skills committee strongly recommends the use of peer response activities for the teaching of writing. It is a collection of helpful ideas to assist you in better integrating peer response activities into the classroom.

Peer Review vs. Peer Response (vs. Peer Editing)

As academics, we are familiar with peer review as part of the academic publishing process where we are asked to evaluate a piece of writing for suitability for publication. We also use peer review to evaluate performance in other instances, such as tenure and promotion review.

Thus for us, peer review is often associated with judging another's work. In the teaching of writing, it can be counterproductive for students to assess another person's performance like a

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teacher or in the ways that we do as peer reviewers of each other. Students often need to be discouraged from seeing their job as fixing or judging the other writer's work like a teacher. The better goal is often to position the work as a reader's response where the student is asked to give authentic reactions: "Here is what I hear, understand, or see." "Here are suggestions you might consider." Once receiving that feedback, the writer's job, then, is to evaluate whether or not to address the reader's response. Students need to understand how this is different from receiving feedback from the teacher who has professional experience and is guiding the student's revision process. While students have to evaluate and choose whether to address the feedback of another student, student writers are obligated to address the teacher's concerns expressed in any feedback (something they often have to be reminded of).

Clearly defining the feedback they will give as "peer response," explaining what that means, and avoiding the terminology "peer review," can take some of the pressure off of students who are uncomfortable with judging their peers, and it can clarify their task in giving feedback. Indeed, peer response more accurately describes what we want students to do than another common term for this activity, "peer editing." Peer editing can give the impression to students that their job is to simply copyedit and proofread only.

Writing theorists also know that student writers are often hesitant to offer negative criticism because of how it might be perceived by their fellow students. Students want to be liked by their classmates, and they are sensitive to the fact that other student writers often don't like to have their writing criticized. We have to work to get them past that. By discussing their role in peer response work, and letting them know that they are not being asked to act as teachers, students will often end up being more productive at peer response. Moreover, let students know that peer response work is not just an activity to receive help on their paper. By thinking about what they learn from the writing of others, students can come to understand that getting good feedback is not the only objective of the activity.

Importance of Descriptive, Detailed Response
Unfortunately, if left to their own processes for giving feedback, many students will choose to proofread only (which may not be appropriate for the learning objectives of the response activity). Or they may choose to only express feedback in very simple one or two word phrases.

The latter can be a result of having received such feedback from teachers on papers in the past. However, we know that a vague comment like "unclear" comment next to a sentence—whether feedback given by a teacher or a student—is often unclear itself to the writer. It could be referring to the literal meaning of the sentence, the sentence's logical order transition in the paragraph, how the evidence in the sentence ties to the current (local) argument, its relevance to the paper's (global) focus, the meaning of a particular term in the sentence, etc. Similarly, comments like "Good" or "Needs improvement" lack the context necessary for student writers to interpret the feedback and apply it.

Students may also gravitate toward simple comments without encouragement to write more

detailed response because it's easier for them. Thinking about why one "likes" a particular passage in a paper, and expressing why, is more work than simply applying a one or two word phrase. When students find this difficult, experience with expressing such simple feedback in more complex terms requires deeper reflection about writing which can be an important learning process.

So encourage students to supply the writer with context by stating "why." Not just "This is good," but "This is good because of the way that you tied this idea back to the main thesis of the paper."

Role of Praise and Negative Criticism in Peer Response

As already mentioned above, some students are hesitant to provide negative feedback because they value their relationships with their peers and want to be liked. On the other hand, because students have received feedback on papers from teachers which is largely focused on what needs to be addressed in revision or why a paper received the grade that it did, other students will tend to adopt this teacher's feedback model and provide predominantly negative feedback.

Therefore, it can be important to discuss with students the need for providing both praise and negative feedback together. Explain that peer response is a constructive criticism process, that negative feedback only tears down the text, and that they need to offer positive feedback to build it back up. Let students know that writers need to know what they are doing well so that they can build upon the strengths of their paper, or, at the very least, make sure not to eliminate something during revision that is working well. Tell them that their peers will be more receptive of negative criticism if they also provide some positive comments.

At the same time, explain to students that writers also need to receive constructive negative criticism so that they can improve their writing. As part of class discussion, ask them to talk about if they've ever had a peer response workshop experience where all of the feedback was good, and ask them to comment on how much that helped them with revision. Finally, explain to students that they can be diplomatic when providing negative criticism. Instead of beginning with statements like "This is wrong" or "This sucks," say "This could be improved by . . ." or "It would work better for me if . . ."

Methods of Response: Guided Peer Response Activities

It's not uncommon for teachers to put students into peer workshop groups without any directions for what to focus on during peer response sessions, and then to leave students to make their own choices. While this might work for more experienced writers, we can optimize the benefit of peer response sessions by having students better focus on specific writing objectives that fit an assignment or the writing skills currently being taught. Without direction from the teacher, peer response workshops may not be productive if what students choose to do as response is not a good fit for the activity objectives. For instance, many students may choose to proofread or copy edit only. Or they might choose some other strategy that they are most comfortable with because it is easiest to them.

Peer Review Worksheets

One way to guide peer review is to prepare worksheets that ask students specific questions about the text. For instance, the worksheet can focus on things like

- Ask students to point out topic sentences.
- Have them state the main point of the paper.
- Have them outline the paper.
- Discuss voice and other audience appropriateness issues.
- Point out where they didn't understand something
- Count the number of sources and evaluate their appropriateness.

Once the students complete the worksheet, they can give it to the writer and discuss the details.

An added benefit of peer response worksheets is that the work is easily assessable for credit by the teacher. Students could complete the worksheet on a computer and send it to their peers. Then the student would have a digital copy to submit as part of their paper assignment portfolio. The teacher can easily check to see if the peer response work was completed during final grading.

{Include at least two example worksheets for different disciplines}

"I Don't Know What to Say": Say Back What You Hear

Many students really struggle with what to say in giving feedback. It can be a combination of wanting the writer to like them and not wanting to offend the writer, or a feeling of inability of being able to tell the writer how to improve the paper. The latter makes a lot of sense. When a student is confronted by a piece of writing much better than their ability to write, they could very easily feel that they have nothing to offer the writer.

The "Say Back" method of response shows students that they always have something to say about a text. In peer response groups,

1. Have the author read her paper out loud.
2. Then, after reading a paragraph or short section, stop. The other students then "say back" what they heard in the writing. The responders are not focused on how to fix it; they just explain "This is what I think you meant," "This is what the writing made me think about," and/or "This is what I expect to come next."
3. Students then discuss what they have said before moving on in the paper to the next section.

This can be valuable feedback for writers because it tells them how readers interpret their writing, and it can stimulate conversation from peer response group members that are not very talkative on their own.

Start with an Outline

Another method is to have students create outlines of other student's papers. Instruct the students to number each paragraph on the draft as they go. On a separate piece of paper, have

students write a sentence which says what they felt was the main point of each paragraph using the numbering system. If a paragraph is very long and seems to have more than one main point (i.e. the paragraph should be broken up), invite students to put more than one number next to the paragraph and express the different main points in the outline.

Outlining also helps students to gain a macro view of the paper. This can allow them to provide better feedback that they might not have been able to on their own without this overview the outline provides. For instance, after outlining, ask students to look at the outline they have created and see if perhaps a different order (structure) for the paper might have worked better. Or ask them to let the writer know any major points or arguments that seem to be missing when they look at the outline, or any paragraphs that are not a good fit (off topic) for the paper.

Meta-Reflective Writing and Response
Writing theorists know that having students reflect on their writing and revising process is a useful learning tool. With peer response, it can be helpful to have students do reflection before and/or after the response session:
- After completing their draft, have students reflect on where they are in the process (e.g., still generating ideas, ready for proofreading, going back to do further research), any future plans for revision, and any concerns about how to move forward. The writer can include this as a note at the end of their draft. Have the peer group members read the note before reading the draft so that they are better able to give the reader contextualized feedback that addresses the writer's needs. Even if you don't have students do this reflection outside of class, it can still be helpful to have each writer do this for a minute verbally in peer response groups before the other students read and respond to their papers.
- After a peer response activity, have students write about the feedback they received, any insights their experience of giving response and looking at the drafts of others (not their own) gave them for their own writing, and current plans for revision. The latter can be very useful. By the time students get around to revising their draft, many will have forgotten some of the feedback from workshopping papers or the revision strategies that they thought of earlier.

Negotiated Response
One method for peer response activities is to have students negotiate with the teacher the focus for the feedback session prior to getting into groups.

Ask students to think about where everyone is in the writing process, and thus whether or not they need feedback on more global concerns—overall paper focus, audience address, structure (organization), argument development, etc.—or local concerns, such as sentence fluency, error correction, or sentence transition. Then ask students what the priorities should be for the peer response session. Write on the board the things that students come up with that are a good fit for your current course objectives (remember that you have a veto as the teacher if a suggestion is not good). And of course include things that students don't think about that might help them

with the learning objectives of the assignment. This discussion is also an opportunity to refresh student memories on recent lessons on writing strategies covered in the course.

Note: If the goal of the particular response session is to focus strictly on global concerns of the paper (e.g., overall structure, argument development, general focus) instead of sentence level issues, it can often be helpful to write on the board *not* to do proofreading or copy editing. Let students know that those activities are better left for later in the writing process after the text is more fully developed and the main ideas and content are stable from revision. Otherwise, some students may devote most of their attention to proofreading or sentence level revising, for often it is what they are most comfortable doing.

Conducting Face-to-Face Peer Response Sessions

There are a few additional tips that can help to make peer response sessions more productive in the face-to-face classroom:

1. Have students read one paper at a time and discuss it before moving onto the next paper. Otherwise, students may try to read all the papers of the group at once and write down feedback, but then have forgotten some of what they read when they go back to discuss each paper.
2. Group size and selection has to be considered carefully given the amount of time available for the activity and the length of the paper being discussed. The teacher has to decide between more intimate one-on-one pairings where some students may feel more comfortable talking, or larger groups with more voices giving feedback. If the paper is very long and not much time is available, it may seem that pairings are all that is possible. However, larger groups can be instructed to read the first half of the paper only and discuss it. In fact, if a larger peer response group seems to be moving too slowly, this is a technique that can allow them to give some feedback on everyone's papers.
3. Students in peer response groups are often not the best at managing their time. Some hurry through. Others can take too long on one student's paper and not give enough to another. Let students know up front about how long they should spend reading and responding to each individual paper, and give them a couple of updates during the process to let them know how much time is left. Also ask the student groups to keep time themselves.
4. Some groups may finish responding to each other's papers well before other groups. To keep all groups productive, it can be helpful to have an extra sample paper for a group to discuss and respond to if they have already responded to their peers in the group. If students know that you are going to keep them busy responding to writing, that also eliminates the tendency some groups may have of wanting to finish quickly so that they can goof off or do something else (e.g. work for another class). Or if the class has posted their papers online, have the groups that finish early discuss someone's paper that is not in the group.
5. Having the writers read their papers out loud is an old trick for helping them to find errors or awkward sentences. Our brain processes things differently when we hear our writing than when reading to ourselves. But this technique can also add a little energy to the

classroom (gets very noisy!). It can get groups used to lots of conversing. And it can simply add some variance to previous response activities to increase student engagement.

The Teacher's Role During Workshop Activities

While students are workshopping their drafts in groups, it can be good for the teacher to float around the room and visit the groups as an observer for a few minutes here, a few minutes there. However, be wary of pushing them too hard to stay on task. Some amount of off topic communication has been shown to be good for productivity with group dynamics.

And be wary of taking over the group; you don't want to undermine the collaborative activity. Try to stimulate the conversation rather than making yourself the leader and center of attention. Asking questions of group members which gets them talking can be a good way to do this. If a student asks you a question, you might answer it, but redirect it back to the group and let them take a stab at it before you do.

Grading/Credit for Peer Response

If a teacher chooses, some incentive for completing peer response assignments can be useful, and it can be included as either part of the grade for the paper assignment or part of a class participation grade. Knowing that their peer will read the comments given is often enough to get students to take the task seriously. Simply giving them credit for participating can often result in productive workshops.

The response worksheets mentioned above would be particularly easy to grade credit/no credit simply for completing the assignment. Or have students complete a post response workshop reflection where they list the other participants. Think about the many different peer response techniques above, and there are certainly ways to adapt some of them to make them easily assessable as credit/no credit. At the very least, you could always give students credit for simply attending a peer response workshop by basing it off of your attendance role.

Providing more discriminating grades (such as a range of points or an "A, B, C, etc.") based on qualitative assessment of the feedback each student gives could be very challenging:
- First, if students are encouraged to see themselves as giving reader responses where they are merely asked to share opinions, in some ways, all authentic responses could be considered as equally valid, even though some would likely be more useful to the writer.
- Next, some papers are easier to respond to than others, giving some students in a workshop an advantage over other students in being able to easily give good feedback.
- Finally, because responses are context driven, there may not be a simple way to evaluate the response without direct comparison with the text that is being responded to; comparing the responses to the other student's draft, and then writing evaluative comments that explain why the response was not a good one, could be very time consuming.

Given how difficult the assessment task of providing letter grades or different point values could be, it is probably best to stick to credit/no credit for grading and spend your time giving more robust feedback on student drafts instead. Trust instead that the concepts of this guide can help you to run peer response activities that can be productive without having to "use the stick" of more formal grading. Remember, too, that if students work hard at peer response, it should help them with their own writing and reflect in the final grade they receive for that.

Using Technology for Peer Response

Many of the different methods of response mentioned above can be adapted for use with technology, either in a computer classroom or an online class, using some of the strategies that follow.

MS Word Comment Feature

Editors and publishers in the professional world (and many teachers) regularly use Microsoft Word's commenting feature to give feedback to writers. Since students typically have access to MS Word outside of class--and it's available for use in the GVSU computer labs--it can be an effective tool for giving feedback. There are many print and video tutorials available online for using the commenting feature, and it's simple for students to learn and use. Students can easily highlight a section of text and type in their feedback.

It can also be fun to do a musical chairs peer response activity with MS Word when teaching in a computer lab because it gets them up and moving around the room:

1. Have students open their papers on their computers in MS Word and have them save it with a new version name. Tell them to close out all other programs (so that they don't leave their email or Facebook page open for others to see).
2. Have each student in the class rotate to a new computer (could be several seats away, clockwise or counter clockwise around the room).
3. Tell students to read the draft and add their responses.
4. After enough time for reading and writing some comments has progressed, have students save the document (so that it doesn't accidentally get closed out), but leave it open in MS Word. Then have everyone rotate to a new computer for another round of commenting.
5. You can do this multiple times such that each student document has multiple sets of eyes adding their responses.
6. *Tip:* Because multiple students are responding to the draft, tell them to see a previous comment as a discussion that they can join. They can edit the previous comment if they want to comment on the same section of text, skip a line or two, add a note like "New responder:" either agreeing or disagreeing with the previous responder.
7. *Important:* It's probably not a good idea to have students do this with their own computers, whether in the computer lab or in the regular classroom. There's too much potential for a student to damage another computer because it accidentally gets knocked off a desk or some other mishap. Besides, some people are not comfortable having just

anyone use their computer, and there are certainly reasonable privacy concerns about doing so.

MS Word Track Changes

Microsoft Word's Track Changes is an excellent feature used by editors and publishers to work with authors. At first glance, it might seem like a great tool for student proofreading/copy editing workshops. However, Track Changes has an "accept all" feature. It's too easy for a student to take all the changes without even looking at them (which makes it problematic for teacher feedback on drafts as well). It's better to use the MS Word Comment Feature and have students explain the error as a comment so that the writer has to at least make the correction, even if they don't think about it much. Or simply do a proofreading/copy editing workshop with a print copy. That always works.

Google Drive Documents

Google Drive has an online word processor that is more limited as a writing tool in many respects than MS Word, yet it offers some increased functionality for responding and talking about writing. First, students can share their document links and enable commenting without having to trade files back and forth, as one would have to do to take advantage of MS Word's commenting features. Google's commenting feature also has discussion threading built in so that one can reply as a separate comment to an existing comment.

Before using this technology in the classroom, be sure to research tutorials that show how to share document links, how to enable commenting for document visitors, and how to use the commenting features. Know that because all of the students have GVSU Gmail accounts, they already have a Google Drive account.

Adobe Reader Comments

While for the most part, MS Word or Google Drive commenting features are a little easier to use, Adobe Reader, starting with version XI, has an annotation feature built in for posting comments on PDFs. This can be useful for documents that are not word processing files to begin with.

Blackboard Forums

Blackboard forums can be another good way for students to share drafts and post feedback. It can help for the teacher to create peer response groups with their own forum threads so that they can share their drafts as attachments, and then respond. It's also helpful to remind students how easy it is to reference a section of a text using copy and paste with quotes in the Blackboard comment field so that writers know specifically which part of a draft they are referencing.

Creating a Peer Response Conversation Online

One of the advantages of face-to-face peer response groups is that it often results in a conversation about the text. For a completely online peer response workshop experience, the teacher can stimulate a similar conversation by requiring students to use Google Drive documents or Blackboard forums.

For Day 1, have the students read and post their initial responses. For Day 2, have everyone (including the writer) respond to other responses. Perhaps it would be good to have a follow-up Day 3 with additional responses. Otherwise, without the assignment requiring them to visit and engage in conversation over a period of time, most students will post once and not return.

In a completely online class, it could be possible to have students agree to workshop via online chat systems. Although consider that having students schedule a meeting time where they can all get together online might be difficult. Give them plenty of days advance notice to schedule this activity.