Peer Feedback in Writing Instruction

Sasha Woodard

Michigan State University

April 24, 2011
Teaching Project:

Peer Feedback in Writing Instruction

What most encourages students to improve their writing? Is it teacher feedback that best motivates a student to rethink his work, that inspires him to write better? Is it a student’s reflection on her own piece that leads to the greatest improvement? Or is it feedback from peers that most encourages students to make revisions to their writing? Many studies, as well as my own professional experience, have revealed that peer feedback plays a powerful role in engaging students in the revision process. Students care about the opinions of their peers, willingly accept peer suggestions for revision and feel empowered as writers in the process. Yet peer feedback is only effective when taught and implemented well. While I have used writing partners in the past, I have never trained my students in the process of peer feedback. Occasional meetings occurred in which my students helped their partners brainstorm, revise and edit pieces of writing, but this approach always felt somehow empty. While the students showed a great desire to collaborate with and receive input from their peers, the quality of the collaboration was always lacking. Most students walked away from the meetings with no new direction and few suggestions that were actually helpful in refining their pieces. Seeing this pattern occur year after year I decided I needed to do something. There had to be another way to develop these writing relationships, an approach that would be more effective, engaging and that would encourage my students to grow as writers. It seems that using peer feedback in the writing process is the answer.

Types of Feedback

Feedback can take many forms and serve many purposes. Feedback can be motivational when it encourages a behavior. Verbal praise is an example of motivational feedback. Feedback can also be reinforcing, used to “reward or punish very particular prior behaviors” (Nelson &
Schunn, 2009, p. 376). In a third sense, feedback is informational; it informs a learner about how to change his/her performance. In the writing classroom, feedback can take all these forms to some extent. However, I would argue that most often peer feedback as used in the writing process is informational. It is used to inform a student about how to revise his writing in order to improve the piece. Thus, from this point forward when I talk about feedback, I mean that which informs a writer and his writing.

In addition to taking many forms, peer feedback in the writing classroom can serve many purposes as well. DiPardo and Freedman (1988) classify feedback in terms of the purpose it serves. Peer feedback may be used for thinking and writing collaboratively, in which students come together to solve problems related to the writing process or work together to coauthor a shared piece. More commonly, peer feedback, commonly called peer response groups, are used for responding to writing, which includes editing student writing. While all of these purposes of peer response groups hold unique value in the writing classroom, in this report I am focusing on peer feedback that serves to respond to writing. I have in mind partnerships or groups in which “group members work in turn with different individuals on their individually owned products” (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988, p. 120).

In a study by Nelson and Schunn (2009), feedback within the informational realm is broken down further. The five distinct types of feedback they identify are: summarization, specificity, scope, explanations and affective language. Summarization refers to comments that reorganize the student’s writing into a more condensed statement(s) (a summary). Such feedback helps the writer recognize if what she actually wrote is what she intended to write, what she really meant to say. The category of specificity refers to the amount of detail provided in the feedback. The amount of specificity in a comment falls along a continuum, from vague to highly
detailed. Similar to specificity is the term scope. Scope refers to the narrowness – or, in my mind, the specificity – of the comment. Does the comment refer to a specific or general concept? (“Give an example of how he was courageous” versus “add more dialogue,” respectively.)

Feedback for explanation details why a certain suggestion is given or a suggested change is needed. Affective language includes both the positive and negative language used to provide feedback. Praise as well as constructive criticism falls under this category.

Unique to these categories of feedback put forth by Nelson and Schunn (2009), Brooks (2010) categorized feedback in terms of writing purpose in a different way. See Figure 1 for examples of these categories of feedback.

**Figure 1: Types of Feedback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Feedback</th>
<th>Feedback Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writer’s Strategies</td>
<td>“Align your thesis with your examples.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Try using a cause and effect approach to organize your ideas.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“This sounds like a summary.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader’s Needs</td>
<td>“I don’t understand how this quote supports your topic sentence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Edits</td>
<td>“You use the word ‘experiences’ a lot. Try to use a synonym at least one time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Edits</td>
<td>“That’s a run-on sentence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Playback</td>
<td>“Good conclusion – it really ties together all the points you make throughout the paper.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Response</td>
<td>“You sound bored.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Praise</td>
<td>“Great job on your writing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The five forms of feedback mentioned above were studied by Nelson and Schunn (2009) in order to determine what factors influence actual *implementation* of the peer feedback a student receives. Most importantly, their study and the study conducted by Brooks (2010) revealed that the effectiveness of all these forms of feedback hinged on one thing: understanding. Not one form of peer feedback led to implementation unless the student receiving the feedback clearly understood the problem in his writing about which the peer was commenting. While this seems an obvious assertion, it is perhaps for that reason also overlooked. In my own use of writing partners I have assumed that students understand the comments they receive from their peers. I figure they can hear suggestions from another student, then turn right around and apply the changes to their writing. Yet it appears that in order for feedback to be understood, it must take certain forms.

Through their investigation, Nelson and Schunn discovered that summarization types of feedback as well as comments that contain greater detail about the problem area in the piece – with potential suggestions about how to fix that weak area – were the two types of feedback that most often led to actual implementation. This was actually the most powerful feedback peers could provide. “A writer was 10% more likely to make changes when a solution was offered than when it was not offered” (Nelson & Schunn, 2009, p. 388). In addition, students were more likely to implement feedback received from their peers if comments were specific rather than general. Affective language was found to play an interesting role, as it appeared to serve as a mediator to implementation. When a peer provided praise of another student’s writing, the student’s opinion of their peer reviewer seemed to improve, which in turn made implementation of the suggestions more likely.
This discovery about which factors lead to implementation is crucial because only when students actually implement the suggestions received will I see improvement in my students’ writing. If I desire to see real revising as a result of peer feedback in my writing classroom, I will need to teach my students to provide feedback in the form of summaries and suggestions that detail specifically the problem areas of a piece and also offer suggestions for how to “fix” these problems.

*Delivery of Feedback*

In the study conducted by Brooks (2010) peer feedback was provided in an oral as well as a written format. Small groups of three high school students met to revise each other’s drafts and primarily wrote suggestions in the margins of the papers. There was some verbal feedback provided through the discussion that ensued as the students were reading over the papers.

The findings of the study show that written feedback was implemented at least half of the time and occasionally all written comments led to changes. This mode seemed effective to the extent that the author understood the comments and cared about improving his/her writing. The oral feedback proved a great support for the written feedback. For the most part, the oral comments repeated the written comments students provided. The advantage of the oral format is that it led to discussions about the problem areas indicated in the written comments. These conversations revealed to the student writer the importance of making the suggested change, or helped him to better understand the feedback given. With greater understanding came more frequent implementation, so evidently the oral feedback was crucial to the peer revision process.

*Grouping Arrangements*

DiPardo and Freedman (1988) found in a review of relevant studies that organizing students in small groups versus pairs did not have a significant impact on the effectiveness of
peer feedback. Both arrangements proved useful, though they have slightly different strengths. Some of the relevant literature asserts that pairs encourage a writer to be more self-reflective whereas working in small groups exposes a writer to a wider range of views and encourages him to anticipate and see things from many perspectives. However, when it comes to using peer feedback in my writing instruction, research does not signal that I should use one organization over the other. It seems that the strengths of each should be weighed carefully and I should select which arrangement to use based on which one best suits my instructional goals.

The grouping of students in regards to ability is another important component. Brooks (2010) found that using heterogeneous grouping was effective, though it provided different benefits to struggling writers and strong writers. In a study using small groups of three students, it appeared that heterogeneous grouping was beneficial for struggling writers because they were able to learn revising strategies from their more capable peers. In turn, the stronger writers seemed to benefit from being able to articulate and share their writing knowledge. In addition, Brooks’s analysis revealed that struggling writers prove capable of providing constructive feedback that is useful, and that strong writers did make the suggested changes in order to improve their writing. Evidently, heterogeneous groupings can work for all students! However, Brooks taught his students how to give constructive peer feedback before requiring them to engage in peer revision. The key in order for all students to be able to make good suggestions is to train them.

**Advantages of Using Peer Feedback**

MacArthur (2007) states that peer revising is “recommended as a way of providing student writers with an audience of readers who can respond to their writing, identify strengths and problems, and recommend improvements” (p. 146). Beyond these general advantages, there
are a variety of specific ways in which using peers response in the revision of students’ writing is advantageous.

*Student Engagement*

Naturally, using peer feedback leads to greater student engagement than the use of teacher feedback because students are actively involved in the revision process. In addition, it appears that the more students engage in peer response, the more engaged with it they become (Martin, 2004). As students realize how helpful their peers’ comments can be in improving their writing, they have a greater desire to receive that help. Thus they write more comments on each other’s work and engage in more discussion about the pieces they review. Hyland and Hyland (2006) found in a review of the relevant literature that students are more motivated to participate when revision involves peer review because they sense a more authentic audience than that which exists when teacher is the reviewer.

*Student Ownership*

Using peer feedback leads to a greater sense of autonomy than use of teacher feedback because students have more control in the revision that occurs (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Since they are not relying on a teacher to “fix” their writing but are sharing the revising responsibilities with others who have similar challenges with writing, they feel more autonomous as writers. By using peer groups in writing, we are allowing students to take charge of their own learning, to create knowledge and to rely on their peers to influence their learning. Power is taken away from the teacher and we make writing once again a collaborative act (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Nelson, 2004). Martin (2004) found that when students share this responsibility with the teacher, they take more risks, experimenting with different writing styles in ways they might not have otherwise had they been writing to follow the guidelines of the teacher.
Effect on Student Performance

Another strength of peer feedback is that it gives the writer a greater awareness of audience. DiPardo and Freedman (1988) assert that a greater sense of audience correlates with more successful writing. Based on the comments students receive through the peer review process, students also become more aware of the needs of the audience, which in turn improves writing.

Interestingly, peer feedback has been found to enhance students’ abilities to revise their own work as well (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). By developing a greater understanding of (writing to an) audience, students understand which questions to ask about someone’s writing in order to better evaluate and revise it. A student is likely to apply these concepts to her own writing after doing it successfully with peers and in this way better reflect on and revise her own work.

Language Acquisition

Hyland and Hyland (2006) report that peer feedback provides important language learning opportunities for second language learners. The discussions about writing that occur during a peer response group session provide accurate language input for the language learner. Discussion also provides opportunities for language practice with immediate feedback from peers. In addition, as the second language learner listens to his peers discuss, he is practicing making meaning in his second language, which will further refine his second language abilities.

As a side note, there are special considerations to be made when asking second language learners to participate in peer revision (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Culture as well as language aptitude can play a large role in a students’ willingness or ability to participate in peer response groups. Students’ cultures affect their ideas about how to interact appropriately, roles within a group and politeness. So the question remains as to whether or not teachers should organize peer
response groups to be culturally homogenous, so that issues of linguistic and cultural difference do not affect the success of the group interactions.

**Social Interactions**

The social interactions that occur in peer response groups are perhaps as important as the feedback itself. According to learning theories that view language and learning as social processes, a strategy such as peer feedback is necessary to include in writing instruction. Social learning theories, such as those of Vygotsky and Dewey, hold that learning takes place and knowledge is created through social interactions. Thus when students engage in discussions about their writing with their peers, their writing skills will develop (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

**The Process Approach**

Using peer feedback in the revision process is a key in shifting from the product to process approach of writing (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988). Rather than focusing on the end product, peer revision focuses students on the process of writing and revising. It encourages students to take time in the midst of the process to slow down, think about and reflect on their writing. In addition, peer response brings the focus of writing back to the process rather than the final product by eliminating the construct of teacher as evaluator (Martin, 2004). By eliminating the teacher from the revision process, students stop seeing feedback as evaluative and writing as a task to complete in order to receive a grade. Instead, by engaging with peers, they learn that together they can shape each other’s writing in progress.

**Implementing Peer Response Groups**

It is difficult to find suggestions in the literature about how to effectively implement peer response or feedback groups in the writing classroom. DiPardo and Freedman (1988) explain that “response groups have been seldom studied to illuminate just what processes are thereby
supported, and how” (p. 119). Yet from the studies that have been completed we know that to be effective, careful training and instruction on revising strategies must accompany the use of peer revising in the writing classroom (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; MacArthur, 2007). As VanDeWeghe (2004) points out, “The presumed correlation between a student’s ability to write and to critique is a dubious one. The ability to give appropriate and helpful feedback to other writers is a learned set of strategies and skills that all developing writers must be taught” (p. 95). Without being taught specific strategies for revising peer writing, students have been found to give only general feedback and hesitant to provide constructive remarks, either because they lack the necessary skills or because they fear coming across as criticizing (MacArthur, 2007). However, when students are provided with appropriate preparation, they provide more feedback to their peers, the feedback is more specific and useful, and students are more likely to use the feedback to make revisions (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

One effective strategy for implementing peer response groups focuses on clarity of text. In this approach, one student reads the piece of a peer, serving as editor. The student reads the piece until he reaches a part that is not clear. At that point, he discusses with the author the problem area and together they decide on a way to rewrite the part so that it makes sense. The student editor then continues reading, following the same strategy each time he encounters an unclear portion. MacArthur (2007) explains that this approach has been found to improve clarity and comprehensibility of student writing.

Another effective strategy utilizes a rubric to provide feedback (Andrade, Buff, Terry, Erano & Paolino, 2009). The teacher, or teacher with input from the students, first creates a rubric that includes all the writing components she desires to see in the final draft of a piece (for example: word choice, organization, sentence fluency, etc.). A teacher introduces the rubric and
discusses it with students before requiring them to use it. Together, teacher and students might also read some model writing pieces as they reference the rubric to notice how the criteria on the rubric actually looks in a piece of writing. After receiving this scaffolding, students have the ability to revise a peer’s writing using rubric-referenced feedback.

Another suggested strategy incorporates a rubric with the use of the COACH strategy (Andrade et al, 2009). COACH is an acronym that represents the components of the peer revising process. With the COACH acronym, students are taught to **Commend** (praise), **Observe** (reflect on how the author’s and evaluator’s writing is similar), **Ask** (questions to clarify meaning and determine appropriate revisions), **Consider** (the author’s feelings when delivering feedback) and **Help** (make sure feedback is always useful). A rubric can be integrated in the “Ask” portion, assisting the peer reviewer in providing more specific, useful feedback.

Regardless of the training strategy, modeling effective peer feedback is key to its successful implementation. This can be done in many ways. A teacher can read through a piece of writing with his students. Along the way, he models giving appropriate feedback. As they progress through the piece or with other pieces, the teacher can provide fewer model responses and instead ask students to try to formulate (together or independently) appropriate feedback (VanDeWeghe, 2004). Another recommended technique uses the “fishbowl” strategy to allow students to observe a model peer revision session between the teacher and a few students (Andrade et al, 2009). The class forms two circles of chairs around the teacher and a couple students who are in the middle of the circle. In this manner, all the students can easily view and listen to a model peer revising session. As an alternative, two or three students might sit in the center to model and the teacher might be there to coach them through the process, also providing the meta-cognition behind why the students do what they do in a peer revising session.
In addition to viewing successful models, “students need to experience quality ways of responding firsthand, not just be told about them” (VanDeWeghe, 2004, p. 95). By receiving direct instruction regarding what “response” really means, students’ writing achievement will be positively impacted (Simmons, 2003; VanDeWeghe, 2004). Simmons’s study of high school students’ use of feedback in the revision process reveals that students that have received direct instruction for peer revision provide more useful feedback. Rather than commenting on spelling and grammar (actually editing rather than revising), they provide feedback about writer’s technique and the reader’s perspective. Apparently, students who are trained have a different – more meaningful – working definition of response. An important distinction to teach students according to Martin (2004) is that focusing on the end product is evaluative but response focuses on “the initial reaction…usually in the form of questions to the writer about the content or form of the piece” (p. 121). Figure 2 details response techniques to include in writing instruction.

**Implications for Teaching Practice**

As MacArthur (2007) pointed out, instruction on revising strategies must occur for peer response to be effective. This is an addition I need to make to my writing instruction. My revision instruction to this point has been limited in time and depth, so certainly needs to be more explicit and encompass more techniques. Many of the articles and studies I reviewed also indicate the need for direct instruction on giving useful feedback and how to interact in peer response groups. As Nelson and Schunn (2009) pointed out, in my teaching of effective feedback, I will need to include those suggestions that detail specifically the problem areas of a piece and also offer suggestions for how to “fix” these problems, for it is those suggestions that will most likely be implemented.
**Figure 2: Feedback Techniques to Teach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Techniques to teach response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technique</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing your writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying evaluation versus response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling specific praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling suggestions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole-class response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response conference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Simmons, J. (May 2003). Responders are taught, not born. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 46*(8), 684-693.
I envision including this direct instruction of strategies and types of feedback early in the year. I will include a lot of scaffolding as I model for the students how I provide effective written feedback, making explicit the types of feedback and what each one looks like. I also plan to reference the rubric we use for district writing assessments to help them understand how to comment on the writing traits that might be present. Then I will spend time practicing the process with students and ask them to practice the new skill together before finally asking them to attempt it. I will also include modeling of peer response sessions to help students understand the verbal component of the process. According to Brooks’s (2010) study, I will need to train students in providing written as well as verbal feedback, since both are valuable to the process in different ways.

Finally, I hope to check out Mary K. Healy’s “Using Student Writing Response Groups in the Classroom” in *Teaching Writing: Essays from the Bay Area Writing Project* (1982) – a text Nelson (2004) calls the “primer” for teachers who desire to use peer response in their classrooms. Since the articles I reviewed didn’t provide much detail on how to actually train students in peer response, I hope Healy’s essay will fill in the gaps so that I might use the strategy effectively in my classroom.

**Conclusion**

The concept of using peer response groups in the learning process is not a novel idea. It is an idea that has existed in our schools since the early 20th Century, inspired by John Dewey’s constructivist approach to education that views school as a community in which students interact and cooperate to work towards shared goals (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988). Over 100 years ago students were taught how to respond to each other’s writing with useful feedback, to help each other refine works in progress without being harshly evaluative. Our educational predecessors
saw the value in allowing students to work together in order to share responsibility and construct knowledge. It is a valuable goal worth maintaining in our writing classrooms today. If we do it right and train our students in providing effective feedback, the knowledge about writing and the improvements in writing that they will create will be impressive.
References


