Peer Editing In The 21st Century College Classroom: Do Beginning Composition Students Truly Reap The Benefits?

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ABSTRACT

Since its emergence in the 1960s, critics and instructors alike have lauded the benefits of peer collaboration in the college composition classroom, and more specifically, the value of peer editing. However, the benefits of peer editing are not necessarily realized in traditional entry level writing classes. A consultation of both quantitative and qualitative research reveals that a reverberating dissonance exists between what students (and instructors) desire from peer editing and students' actual abilities as both writers and editors. Since peer editing is inherently designed to directly benefit students and not, although perhaps it does indirectly, cater to the goals of colleagues, administrators, and universities, composition teachers must instead consult students about its effectiveness—not themselves. Teachers have long-speculated and theorized about the way collaborative learning “should be,” but it remains necessary to evaluate how peer editing actually functions in the everyday freshman and sophomore level writing course. In addition to conflicts in theoretical approach, the practice of peer editing is often inhibited by several other factors: time constraints, social graces, off-task talk, and the actual ability of writer and editor, not to mention the endlessly variable ways of creating (or not creating) peer editing rubrics. While group collaboration should undoubtedly remain a part of the college composition classroom, professors must begin to consider the possibility that peer editing may, in fact, be more detrimental than previously imagined. Furthermore, critics have traditionally focused on evaluating peer editing in the much larger theoretical context of “collaborative learning,” which oftentimes leaves professors with little or no direction for actually putting peer editing into practice. Since no discernable solution has emerged in over fifty years, it is time to finally dispel the illusion that peer editing guarantees better college writers.

Keywords: peer editing; peer review; collaborative learning; college composition

DISCUSSION

ver the course of this semester, several of my students have approached me about various dissatisfactions with our peer editing days. After one of the peer editing sessions, one of the strongest writers in my English 101 class asked if he could opt out of peer editing because he felt that “it just didn’t benefit” him. He explained to me that working with weaker writers only benefited them, and that he was left without any constructive criticism; when his peers read his work, they did not offer any feedback other than “it’s really good.” In their article “Peer Review from the Students’ Perspective: Invaluable or Invalid?,” Charlotte Brammer and Mary Rees cite the problem that my student experienced: “If the developed writer laments the lack of ‘qualified peers’ available for review, he or she may be correct on some levels: the excellent student writer may not have a true peer if that student defines a peer as someone of equal skills” (2007). While I reasoned with my student about the benefits of peer editing, I couldn’t help feeling that he was, indeed, being short-changed. In an effort to fix this problem, I experimented with the assignment of peer editing pairs, and at times groups of three, in several different ways: randomly, according to strength, or simply according to whom each writer felt most comfortable with. At other times, I allowed students to pick their own groups. However, no matter how the pairs or groups were constructed, certain students always remained dissatisfied.

While I explained to other disgruntled students that peer editing is not an infallible way of getting better grades on papers, nor is it a perfect aid for revision, the root of the problem for many of them seemed to lie not only in the quality of peer feedback, but in the type of peer feedback as well. While some students felt that their peers were “too easy” on them and that they “didn’t get a whole lot out of the session,” others felt that peers were “kind of mean” and “too picky.” Still others walked away confused by their peers’ comments or felt that the revisions their peers suggested would actually harm their final product instead of improve it.

Peer editing in lower level composition courses is much less effective than it is in upper level composition courses. Critic Patricia McAlexander discusses the effectiveness of peer editing in lower level composition classrooms in her essay “Developmental Classroom Personality and Response to Peer Review.” She acknowledges that some teachers argue “that for developmental writers, peer review is useless, a case of ‘the blind leading the blind’” (2000). However, she goes on to formulate an important stipulation before agreeing with the argument that peer review is “useless”:

As a composition teacher, I can accept this argument only when it applies to less skilled developmental writers. Peer review can in fact be of particular benefit for more able developmental students—those with what we could call intermediate and upper level skills. These young men and women have enough confidence and ability that they can, with training, comment on each other’s paper constructively—and they have as much to gain from the experience as any writer. (2000)

I agree with McAlexander here, but aside from the variance of skill that will always reside within the “developmental” composition classroom, there is a definite disparity between the benefits of peer editing in upper level and lower level composition courses. While peer editing may be beneficial for students who are enrolled in upper level composition courses, particularly English majors, it does not meet the needs of many lower level composition students.

Although peer editing has never posed as a simple or flawless process, it has been well-received by the vast majority of composition professors in recent years—and for some valid reasons—but it is perhaps too applauded. There is no doubt that peer editing does have its redeemable qualities; it provides students with an alternate means of instruction and an important social construction of learning that teachers simply cannot provide in their role of authority. However, evident in my students’ complaints, peer editing offers lower level composition students much less benefit than it is intended to provide. Becky Flores, in her essay “Deracination and the D.I.S. in the First-Year Writing Classrooms,” describes similar frustrations with peer editing in the lower level composition classroom: “Yet, perhaps like many teachers, I found that my students achieved less from peer review in practice than its much-lauded promises” (2004). Like Flores, I believe that peer editing in lower level composition classrooms is less effective than widely supposed.

In order to further investigate the problems with peer editing that lower level composition students experience, I will first turn to quantitative research. In an effort to evaluate students’ perceptions of peer review, Brammer and Rees conducted a study at a private master’s-level comprehensive university in the southeastern United States. Out of the 72 asked, 22 faculty members teaching a first-year Communication Arts course (which, according to Brammer and Rees, is the equivalent of any first-year composition course) responded. Out of the 1,296 students asked to participate, 328 responded, which kept the university’s 1:15 faculty-student ratio intact. Of the responding students, 63% were female and 31% were male, which is also consistent with the university’s demographics. Student respondents also represented a fairly even spread of 30 majors and concentrations (Brammer & Rees, 2007).

Overall, Brammer and Rees found that peer review in first-year composition courses is not as effective as desired. According to the results of the study, “The aggregate averages from the course evaluation results suggest that peer review is used in most of the university’s first year writing classrooms, but most students find peer review ‘not very helpful’” (2007). In addition, Brammer and Rees found that “Only one-third of the student respondents see value in in-class peer-review” (2007). If I were to assume that similar results would manifest if my own classroom were evaluated, it would mean that about two-thirds of my students are not getting what they want out of peer editing; essentially, about seventeen of the twenty-five students in my class are walking away from peer editing

dissatisfied. These statistics alone indicate that problems certainly do exist with peer editing in lower level composition classrooms.

The Brammer and Rees study also revealed that first-year composition students saw a major problem with the qualifications of their peer editors, and even, admittedly, with their own ability to peer edit. According to the free-response comments in their study, Brammer and Rees found that students were concerned with the “perceived ability of the peer reviewer and his/her investment in providing quality feedback.” In addition, “many students indicated that they did not trust their peers to review their papers, stating that *I’ve never understood how having all students, including those who make C’s & D’s on papers, is beneficial. If they can’t write a good paper, why do I want them to correct mine?*” (Italics original, 2007). They also found that out of the 52% of the free-response comments that focused on the quality of the reviewer, “most expressed concerns about classmates’ dedication and ability to peer review. For example, one student responded, *I don’t trust my peers to review my paper. I don’t think they can do it competently, just like I don’t think I can give a good Peer review b/c I am a horrible writer*” (Italics original, 2007). Evident both in the student responses in this study and the feedback that I have received from my students, many of them feel that the benefits of peer editing are not realized because of the dissonance that arises between what students desire from peer editing and students’ actual abilities as both writers and editors.

While it would be ideal to dismiss judgments about individuals’ writing and editing abilities in order to evaluate peer editing as an even playing ground, patterns of dissatisfaction regarding students’ perceived abilities of their peer editors also began to emerge in my classroom. According to student feedback regarding others’ abilities as well as their own, my students consistently brought up concerns that can be summarized as follows: weaker writers who worked with weaker writers felt like they gained little concrete direction for improvement; stronger writers who worked with weaker writers felt used, like their peers had not returned the favor of revision; weaker writers who worked with stronger writers often felt pleased, but at other times, confused by their peers’ suggestions; stronger writers who worked with stronger writers tended to argue and become more interested in defending their own writing than truly collaborating to improve each draft. Undoubtedly, peer editing is both an elusive and complicated process.

In addition to examining quantitative research in order to evaluate the problems with peer editing, it is also necessary to consult qualitative research. Since its emergence in the 1960s, critics have discussed peer editing using a multitude of terms in conjunction with its overarching conceptual foundation. Peer editing can be considered a specific component of peer tutoring, and within an even bigger scope, a form of collaborative learning or group work. Critics do not often discuss peer editing on its own but focus instead on evaluating the practice of peer tutoring in all forms of application, whether it be during conferences between students outside of the classroom, during group work within the classroom, or during classroom peer editing sessions. Peer editing is also often referred to as peer review, peer response, and peer evaluation. For the purposes of this discussion, I am interested in evaluating peer editing (peer review, peer response, peer evaluation) as it functions in lower level composition classroom sessions in which students work together to improve the drafts of papers and assignments. However, within this discussion, peer tutoring, group work, and collaborative learning must be addressed because they serve as the basis for peer editing.

Before pursuing the problems of peer editing in lower level composition courses, the theory behind peer tutoring must be addressed in order to identify the benefits that it is intended to provide. Kenneth Bruffee begins his seminal essay “Peer Tutoring and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” by stating that “The beginnings of peer tutoring lie in practice, not in theory” (1984). Later, however, he explains that proponents of peer tutoring have had to evaluate its theoretical approach since the time it was introduced in the 60s:

More recently, we have begun to learn that much of this practical experience and the insights it yielded have a conceptual rationale, a theoretical dimension . . . The better we understand this conceptual rationale, however, the more it leads us to suspect that peer tutoring (and collaborative learning in general) has the potential to challenge the theory and practice of traditional classroom learning itself. (1984)

Peer tutoring, as Bruffee goes on to explain, is a response to educators’ collective desire to meet the needs of students that cannot be met in the traditional classroom. Since, prior to the introduction of peer tutoring, students

often avoided getting help because it was offered by ancillary programs staffed by professionals, teachers wanted to provide “not an extension but an alternative to the traditional classroom” (1984). Peer tutoring was introduced in order to provide this necessary alternative.

Bruffee explains that peer tutoring is beneficial because of the social context it provides. He considers thought to be “internalized public and social talk,” and, consequently, considers writing to be “internalized talk made public and social again” or “internalized conversation re-externalized” (1984). Therefore, he says, peer tutoring provides the conversation necessary for producing better writing, particularly because the conversation takes place between writers of equal status: peers. The reluctance that students had with the ancillary programs—to consult with those in a position of authority—was thus assuaged with the introduction of peer-directed help. Bruffee concludes that the main goal of peer tutoring is “to provide the kinds of social context in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers” (1984). While the theory behind peer tutoring, and thus, peer editing, is valid, compelling, and well-substantiated, the questions and problems that arise in putting it into practice in lower level composition classrooms can no longer be overlooked.

Like Bruffee, Hephzibah Roskelly recognizes the gain in using social interaction as a learning tool. In her essay “The Risky Business of Group Work,” Roskelly agrees with L. S. Vygotsky and Paulo Freire in that people learn better by listening and speaking. However, she argues that although the majority of professors believe in group work, they have not mastered facilitating it in the classroom:

Whatever our belief in group work, and in the collaboration that ensues from it, we haven’t translated that belief very effectively to our classrooms, to other educators, to administrations. The gap between talk about groups and talk in groups looms large . . . such a gap exists because the purposes of group work are deeply in conflict, and that our refusal to acknowledge and mediate those conflicts has constrained the methods of group work and blunted its effectiveness. (1992)

The two purposes of group work that Roskelly cites as being in conflict are “socialization” and “conscientization” (1992). In other words, in group work, teachers expect students to empower themselves within the classroom but to still work toward the goals of the traditional classroom. This conflict essentially underlies some of the complaints that I get from my students.

When my students express dissatisfaction with peer editing, their various frustrations nearly always come from feeling like they do not receive the “benefit” from it that they feel they should. Through conversing with them about these frustrations, I noticed that the “benefit” that most all of them expected came from a desire to either improve the grades of their papers or a desire to have help in locating errors that they themselves have trouble catching. While it could be argued that my students’ expectations for peer editing are unrealistic, we, as composition teachers, would be lying if we said that we have not wanted peer editing to serve these purposes at one time or another. After all, part of the purpose of peer editing is to help with the revision of student drafts. Brammer and Rees argue that although peer review is by now an entrenched part of the composition curriculum, we still “frequently hear students complain bitterly that peer review is a waste of time or blame their peers for not ‘catching all the mistakes.’ We also hear colleagues grumble that students’ papers are poor in quality and that students do not stay on task during the peer review process. While such behaviors and responses do not support the theory, they are a reality in many educational settings” (2007). With the Brammer and Rees essay being published in 2007, it is apparent that the conflict between the two aims of group work that Roskelly describes in her essay, which was published fifteen years ago, is still alive and well in composition classrooms today.

The benefits that students desire to gain from peer editing reflect the goals of the institution itself, especially the goal of writing academically and as error-free as possible. Students’ concerns with peer editing arise when questions about their drafts are left unanswered, when they receive little indication of what to improve upon or how to make improvements, or when they do not see the grades on their final drafts steadily improving. Again, these are ultimately concerns that come from pursuing the goals of the institution—the second aim within the conflict Roskelly describes. The conflict between students having to, in Roskelly’s terms, “liberate themselves and indoctrinate themselves at the same time” (1992) makes implementing effective peer editing sessions a difficult task for lower level composition teachers.

For Roskelly, the answer to the conflicting aims of group work is to ensure that teachers brave the risks that come with group work in order to help students find a balance between liberation and indoctrination. She concludes her essay with this solution:

We have to make ourselves brave enough to risk the dissent that inevitably comes with democracy in action. Once teachers do that, we'll see the work of the small groups in our classes become the real work in the class, with students negotiating their own ideas against and around the ideas they've offered. When students find a real voice, their own and not some mimicked institutional voice, both students and teachers acknowledge the possibility of the real change that might ensue. (1992)

While positive changes using this approach to group work may indeed occur, her suggestion falls short of solving the practical problems that lower level composition teachers face with peer editing. Even if teachers “brave” the risks involved in using group work, and they often do, there is no guarantee, even if students do negotiate their own ideas with those of others (the essence of peer editing), that they will “find a real voice.” Furthermore, finding this “real voice” means that students must first negotiate that voice within the confines of academic discourse, including during their peer editing sessions. The practical problems with peer editing in lower level composition classrooms that need to be addressed, then, result from this practical need of students to navigate and internalize the academic discourse and then respond effectively within it.

Oftentimes, students in upper level composition courses have been able to develop at least a working knowledge of how to go about writing within the academic discourse—even if their methods for doing so are not perfected. At their level, they have a clearer idea of what is expected of them and what to look for in the revision of their own writing, as well as each others’. Therefore, upper level composition students do not often encounter the same—or as many—problems with peer editing sessions as lower level students do. Most upper level composition students are able to reap the benefits of peer editing sessions simply because they are able to engage in the academic discourse and are therefore able to better critique and direct others’ work within that discourse. In addition, the gap between stronger and weaker writers closes significantly in upper level composition courses for several reasons: attrition typically occurs before weaker students enroll in upper level classes, students who may be weaker in composition and have unrelated majors are no longer required to take composition courses, and weaker writers may have caught up with stronger writers during their lower level coursework. Lower level composition courses, on the other hand, often contain a wide range of student writing abilities, which makes effective peer editing sessions all the more difficult to facilitate.

Many freshman and sophomore students who enter lower level composition classrooms do not have a clear idea of what is expected in their writing, nor do they have a clear sense of what to look for in the revision of their own writing, let alone in the writing of their peers. Most have yet to learn these skills. Therefore, giving an effective critique of a classmate’s paper becomes a challenge. Brammer and Rees say that “Even at a university with limited diversity, students enter the writing classroom with varying writing experiences and skills” (2007). Since colleges cannot control the experiences students have in high school composition classes, it comes as no surprise that professors notice a wide range of student writing ability in their first and second year composition classrooms. While there are exceptions to and varying degrees of student knowledge and ability, the majority of lower level composition students are yet unprepared to deliver the level of writing and revising that is expected of them—and through no fault of their own. Lower level composition students simply have not been immersed in the college curriculum long enough to acquire the knowledge and skills required for writing as effectively as possible within the academic discourse. Consequently, several practical problems arise in lower level peer editing sessions.

While the ideas behind peer review are valid in theory, composition teachers continue to encounter several problems while putting them into practice. Brammer and Rees say, “Many teachers, however, find that establishing a productive community of collaborative writers is anything but easy . . . The sheer number of essays devoted to explaining how to conduct peer review attests to its complexity and required commitment” (2007). In addition to the already addressed complications that arise in the mere assigning of peer pairs or groups, the effectiveness of peer editing in lower level composition classrooms is often inhibited by time constraints, social graces, off-task talk, and actual ability of writer and editor; furthermore, the use and form of peer editing sheets and the type and amount of teacher interaction seems endlessly variable.

Social graces seem to play a particularly tricky role in peer editing. Flores attributes students' reluctance to offer more constructive criticism to "an acute awareness of the potential for slighted feelings," but says that this inclination is counterproductive "if we are to recognize the principle of encouraging students' authority over their own texts" (2004). Furthermore, a student's authority in relaying constructive criticism is often compromised in favor of social grace. The polite stock comments that students write on each others' papers do not provide the kind of truly beneficial suggestions that are supposed to come out of peer editing sessions, and they can often lull writers into a false sense of security. In essence, students believe that if their peer editors say that their paper is "good," then there is no need to revise the draft.

While the feelings of the writer will inevitably always be involved in peer editing sessions—we are all human—peer editors' sensitivity for the emotions of writers often do impede peers from receiving the kind of criticism that will be most helpful, even if the criticism is a little discouraging at times. Especially in lower level composition classes, students tend to let the concern for others' feelings deter them from writing critical comments, even though this concern "creates a barrier to critical, reflective thought" (Flores, 2004). Flores cites overriding politeness as a major problem in peer editing: "Whether because of fear of failure, embarrassment, or concern with social discourse, peer reviews in my classroom were often characterized by ultimately meaningless comments such as 'You did an excellent job' or 'This is really good' that seemed more in keeping with a sincere effort to 'be nice' than to be sincerely critical" (2004). I often see these kinds of comments scribbled on drafts during the peer editing sessions in my classroom.

While upper level composition students may be mature and confident enough to both take and give criticism, this practice is not as seamless for lower level composition students. Critic Barbara Christian calls attention to the social factors that affect lower level peer editing sessions: "The reasons for student resistance in peer-group editing sessions are familiar: shyness, fear, embarrassment, disregard for peers' opinions, and sense of lost ownership. Younger students may hesitate in the face of social power" (2000). While social factors will always be inherent in peer editing, they do impede, as Christian says, "younger" or lower level students especially. Lower level composition students are often more concerned about offering feedback that will earn them social acceptance than offering criticism that will help their peers' writing but could potentially damage peer relationships or harm their social reputation.

On the other hand, comments on the opposite end of the spectrum can be just as detrimental to the peer editing process. When peer editors use little tact in relaying their comments and criticisms, writers often become unreceptive to the peer editing process altogether. When I was reading one of my student's rough drafts that had his peer editors' comments scribbled in the margins, I noticed how potentially harmful the quips were. Under one of the writer's sentences, his peer editor wrote, "This sentence sounds like you are a high school writer." Of course, I knew who his peer editor was, and I also knew that his peer editor had good intentions in writing the comment. In fact, I am confident that the peer editor was trying to push the writer toward a more mature style of writing by using a different choice of words; he just did not know how to tactfully explain this problem to the writer. Perhaps as students who have problems identifying and explaining others' writing problems move from lower level to upper level composition courses, they will have an expanded pool of knowledge from which to formulate critical yet tactful comments. Nevertheless, students who receive hurtful remarks like the one my student endured may not find "benefit" in peer editing simply because they do not want their feelings hurt again.

The variability of peer editing sheets or rubrics is also a major factor that affects peer editing. There does not seem to be any best way of formulating these documents so that they are most beneficial to students. During the first peer editing session in my classroom, I gave students a generic peer editing sheet that asked them questions that would apply to the revising of any collegiate writing assignment. However, after this first session, I tailored the peer editing sheets to the specific writing assignment, in hopes of creating a reference in which students would find more benefit. After two sessions with the tailored peer editing sheets, I asked students for their suggestions in making the next peer editing sheet. While none of them had any particular input concerning the material on the next peer editing sheet, they expressed their opinions about the use of peer editing sheets in general. About half the class begged me not to "make them use a peer editing sheet" and the other half felt that the peer editing sheets were "very helpful."

After class, I chatted with two students who held opposite opinions about the use of peer editing sheets. The student who found the sheets to be helpful said that they helped her know “what to look for” during peer editing sessions, and she liked the fact that most of the questions on the sheet directly correlated with “what we are graded on in the final paper.” The other student who felt that the use of peer editing sheets should be discontinued said that he “felt restricted” by the sheets and that he could do “a much better job” if he didn’t have to answer “those annoying questions.” Like some of my students, many of Flores’ students also did not benefit more from peer editing sheets: “A well-formulated rubric to guide peer review had similarly poor results” (2004). Both of my students had valid reasons for their opinions about peer editing sheets. While one felt that more direction enhanced the revision process, the other felt that direction inhibited the revision process; their differing opinions essentially reflect the long-debated conflicting idea between empowering students and keeping the authority of teachers intact (and no doubt there are varying levels of both). Evident in my students’ split opinions, no clear consensus regarding student empowerment in peer editing has been reached.

Since peer editing is inherently designed to directly benefit students and not, although perhaps it does indirectly, cater to the goals of our colleagues, our administrators, and our universities, we, as composition teachers, should consult the students about its effectiveness—not ourselves. Even though some critics have evaluated peer editing from the students’ perspective, more of this research needs to be done. Brammer and Rees discuss the lack of research that exists on the student perspective of peer editing: “Only a few instances of empirical research examine what the students themselves think of their participation in peer review. Perhaps because peer response is practically instinctive to those of us who teach writing, few have felt the need to study the student perspective” (2007). While composition professors are certainly interested in meeting students’ needs, we must also be concerned about meeting the needs of the academy, the curriculum, and the administration. Teachers have long-specified and theorized about the way collaborative learning “should be,” but it remains necessary to evaluate how peer tutoring, and especially peer editing, actually functions in the everyday freshman and sophomore level composition classroom. Instead of looking to ourselves in order to flesh out the problems with peer editing, we need to consider more extensively how students perceive its benefits or flaws and make changes to accommodate their concerns.

Since peer editing is now well-established and accepted by the majority of composition professors, dislodging the strong (and in some cases blind) affinity for peer editing will be a difficult task. While peer editing should undoubtedly remain part of the composition classroom because of the undeniably valuable social context it provides for writers, problems with its facilitation do need to be addressed. Even though critics have been re-evaluating the effectiveness of peer editing, no substantial conclusion has been drawn regarding the best way to improve it. Ruth Mirtz, in her essay “On-Task or Off-Task in Peer Response Groups: Reframing the Responsibility for Student Behavior,” says that “the potential of peer response to deepen and extend students’ sense of audience and collaborative skills make composition teachers continue to try to find better ways to use peer response groups” (1998). However, much like I had experienced in my own English 101 classroom, many teachers have found that experiments with tweaking peer editing have not proved to be conclusively advantageous. While peer editing may be generally beneficial for upper level composition students, peer editing has yet to meet the needs of many lower level composition students; however, judging from the long-documented existence of this problem, no infallible solution may ever emerge.

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