OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO STUDENT COLLABORATION IN PEER REVIEW OF WRITTEN WORK

Prof. Brenda Fordyce,* Department of English, University of Nether Stowey, 15 Castle Street, Bridgwater, Somerset TA51LN, United Kingdom

Dr. Sean Mulcahey, Department of English, University of the Outer Hebrides, 21 Church Street, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis HS12DD, Scotland

Themes:

Collaboration and Active Learning or Enhancing Collaboration through Instructional Technology

* Corresponding author. Email: bfordyce@gmail.com

Abstract

Abundant literature exists to suggest that, if properly handled, peer view of student writing has many advantages, including increased attention to audience ("the professor may get this, but is it clear enough for Steve and Carol?"), better group cohesion, and the development of critical analytic skills. This, after all, is the principle along which writing circles are organized, where authors read and comment on what their colleagues have written. Yet students often find it difficult to assess one another's work, fearing that if they are too critical, then their peers will subject their own work to pitiless review. As a result, novice critics are generally far too nice, operating on an (often unspoken) "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" principle. How do we overcome student reluctance and invite the advantages of peer review? Based on a decade's teaching at our respective institutions, including extensive use of on-line resources, we offer some practical suggestions for the training that enables students to overcome the obstacles that prevent them from assuming the unaccustomed role of critic.

Introduction

The positive benefits for learning of student collaboration have been documented by a number of educational experts over the past two decades (Biggs, Ramsden, Topping). Students who work together enjoy the benefits conferred by other types of active learning—better understanding of material, longer retention, improved knowledge transfer. Collaboration among students in giving feedback concerning one another's writing would seem a natural extension of the concept

2

that working together produces better learning results than working alone. Yet writing is often seen by them and by academic staff as a solitary activity. Even though students may receive "unofficial" help from room-mates, soul-mates, etc., it is still mainly done alone.

The authors both teach at new institutions in relatively rural parts of the UK and Scotland, respectively, with students who often do not fit the "norm" of the traditional undergraduate. Many are the first in their families to go on to higher education, and while the families are proud of this achievement, they are not in a position to offer much intellectual support. The students are typically bright but often lack basic skills of literary analysis and essay writing. Thus it is essentially up to our academic programmes to provide the remediation required to get them up to speed. We each teach a introductory course on British poetry designed for first-year students, with a great deal of remediation built-in (we take nothing for granted).

Our students often suffer from poor preparation in the fundamentals of writing, but equally, in our opinion, from a certain myopia that makes it difficult for them to judge how their work comes across to the reader. The cure for poor writing is seemingly simple but labour-intensive and time-consuming: practice and feedback and more practice and more feedback and so on in a "virtuous cycle" that lifts them eventually to the level of writing acceptable academic prose.

Yet the time available to even the most dedicated academic staff for this type of remediation is limited. Hence to the problem of poor student writing and a "tin ear" when it comes to assessing one's audience, the solution of involving

students in giving feedback to one another seems especially attractive. Of course student comments cannot replace those of a tutor or other academic staff. Nor should they. However, they do provide a supplement that often reinforces the traditional paper comments offered by tutors or staff. When one of us writes "this is unclear," students may dismiss the comment as that of a dim forty-year-old who just doesn't get it. But if their age-mates are confused as well, the critique gathers weight.

The solution of student peer review, attractive though it is, faces the major obstacle of requiring student buy-in. For the scheme to work, students must understand its rationale. A second, no less important obstacle is that students must also be brought to master some elementary skills of literary criticism. Lest it be thought that this involves the Catch-22 situation of requiring students to have already mastered the very skills that peer review is intended to teach them, we hasten to add that in our experience, these skills can be taught in an effective and efficient manner, once their need is recognized. In the paper that follows, we draw on our own teaching experiences while implementing student peer review of writing, and offer some "lessons learned" that we hope will be of help to others.

Obstacles to Peer Review

The initial resistance we encountered among our students to the idea of commenting on one another's written work frankly came as something of a surprise. Surely, we thought, students would welcome an opportunity to receive extra feedback, especially if it was anonymous, even from their peers. It took

considerable effort on our parts to understand what made students either resist or dismiss our request for peer review as mere busywork or an incomprehensible new imposition on their time.

Why this resistance? The short answer is that we had failed to explain the rationale for our attempted innovation. Not only had we not adequately explained *what* students were to do, but we had totally failed to explain *why* they should do it at all. We considered the "why" self- evident. The students did not. In retrospect, we fell into a trap not uncommon among educational reformers, namely in assuming that students would welcome change because it so clearly represented progress in moving beyond an older, discredited model of "top-down teaching."

Our students, and we suspect those at other institutions as well, turned out to be surprisingly conservative. In retrospect, it is easy enough to understand why. They understood the university game and how it is played, and had actually done well by mastering the rules. We proposed to change the rules, and that was perceived as unwelcome, especially since it appeared unmotivated—a threat to their (fragile) status as newly-minted undergraduates. There is an American saying, to the effect that "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Our students did not perceive that anything was broken. What were we doing, wasting their time with our attempts to "fix" things? Since these are often "first-generation" university students, their status in their own eyes is corresponding fragile. Some secretly believe they do not deserve to be at university at all. Our new and unexpected demands that they go public with something as difficult and relatively sophisticate as a literary critique threatened to expose them as an academic fraud.

The solution to overcoming student resistance was to explain the "why" of the proposed new round of student peer review of writing. We explained that this was a new programme with a potential for giving them important life skills. Since writing is communication, receiving immediate feedback from peers about how well they were communicating would be valuable in improving their prose. To the objection "we're trying to communicate with you, not with our peers," our response was that soon enough they would be leaving university and asked to communicate with a broad spectrum of readers, not just academic staff, and thus this would be a good dry run. More important, we emphasized that the peer review of writing would teach them to become critical readers, and this ultimately aid them in editing their own work. "These are skills that can be learned," we argued, and then tried to back up the argument with the experience to prove it.

Tutorial in Critical Reading Skills

It would seem that students—especially those studying English at university—should come with reading skills already well developed. Shouldn't this be the sort of thing that A-levels require? Apparently not. One of our mantras, indeed, has become "articulate and reinforce even (or especially) those skills you think students have already mastered." Eventually we developed a "mini-course" in critical reading that began with our circulating a piece of "student prose" (an appreciation of Keats's "Ode to Autumn") so flawed that students would have little difficulty dissecting the various infelicities the author had committed. Rather than subject an actual student author to the their scrutiny, we wrote the piece ourselves, and discovered that writing a bad essay can actually be rather

fun. (The essay is included in the appendix.)

To our surprise, however, the students at first found little to criticize, even in this piece of defective prose, other than the author's vagueness and repetitions. This fit the pattern of "excessive niceness" we noted at the outset. So we then produced a "study guide" with questions to guide the students' reading. The questions included the following:

- What is the author's main argument?

- How does he/she support it?

- What is the structure of the essay?

- Are the paragraphs in logical order?

- Are the topic sentences appropriate for each paragraph?

- What is the author's use of simile and metaphor, if any?

- What did you most like about the essay, and why?

- What did you find most confusing, and why?

This template had unexpectedly positive results. The students at last had something solid into which to sink their teeth—a rubric that, in effect, showed them the sort of questions they might be asking of each other's prose. The author of the piece on Keats, they discovered, had no real argument at all (we had been successful in that). Yes, the paragraphs were in logical order, since they followed the stanza sequence of the poem, but without an argument they really weren't going anywhere. And so forth. Our take-home message from this exercise was one we might have guessed from a decade's experience in English tutorials, namely that if you ask students simply to respond to something, they have no idea where to begin, whereas if you ask them specific questions, then they do.

Overall, our hope was to help internalize a set of criteria for judging a piece of work—much like the "internal check-list" we and most academic authors develop over time as an (often unconscious) aid in evaluating and marking student work. So focus is key. Giving students specific guidelines about the sorts of questions to ask was the second main step in helping them become responsive and responsible critics of each others' work — after explaining the rationale of peer review, this seemed to aid them the most in making the transition from consumers to critics. After an initial round of hesitation, they dived in energetically and effectively demolished the "student essay" we had asked them to criticize, finding problems even in areas where we had detected none. Our writing was even worse than we had dared hope!

Step three was allowing students to comment on one another's actual work. We assigned each student one paper from a peer to comment on each week, with the express instruction to look first at the "big picture." We had learned from their dissection of the "Ode to Autumn" essay that they were likely to go first for details—criticizing and offering improvements of specific sentences, suggesting alternative wordings, etc.—rather than looking at the structure of the work as a whole. So we made it a rule that they had first to look for major issues before heading for more minor ones, reminding students that it made no sense to polish sentences in the "Ode to Autumn" essay if the real issue was its overall lack of argument and focus. We also emphasized that a critic is not substituting her or his judgment for that of the writer ("you should do this") so much as giving a reaction ("I was confused when you wrote…")

A typical assignment was a five-page "response essay" to a poem such as Arnold's "Dover Beach"—a poem not too long to take on, but dense enough to provide plenty of opportunity for student insights, should they be forthcoming. Students were asked to take a position ("the poem works because..." or "Arnold's view of the coming age is too bleak because..." and argue their point with textual evidence. No secondary sources could be cited, since in our experience beginning students tend to take refuge behind prominent critics ("As Terry Eagleton wrote...") as a substitute for their own opinions. The first round of essays were, predictably, weak and quite superficial, as were the student peer reviews. But we were determined to keep going, and hit upon the stratagem of getting the authors of each essay to explain the intentions.

To help the student "critic" gauge what would be useful feedback, we asked the author of each essay to write a paragraph stating their intentions in writing the piece. "I want to show that..." was the standard beginning. This proved to be an extremely valuable exercise on two counts. First, it helped the authors sharpen their focus. Second and perhaps more important, it prompted the "critics" to abandon the temptation to rewrite the essay as they would have written it themselves, and instead concentrate on the gap (or consonance) between stated goals and actual paper. To our relief, the quality of criticism improved.

Using Electronic Resources

Because our universities are situated in rural areas, as stated above, and because our students often (though not invariably) continue to live at home, distance

learning is an integrated part of teaching in our institutions. (Students at the University of the Outer Hebrides face the additional hurdle of unreliable ferry service during the winter months.) The first meetings of our Introduction to British Poetry courses required that students be physically present, and face-to-face contact was established during our discussion of the "Ode to Autumn" essay. However, from the fourth week on, we encouraged students to send their comments to one another via email. There is a weekly five-page paper assignment, for which we assigned different peer reviewers in the class (class size averaged 25 students). Copies of the comments were to be sent to us as well, so that we could monitor their tone and content. The recipient of feedback was allowed to respond (and required to cc us with the response). Not many typically chose to do so.

At week six, we opened a "feedback forum" so that students could see feedback from all members of the class. Some patterns were emerging by then, such as the focus by the "critics" on lack of specificity and evidence, and we thought it would be useful to highlight these commonalities. We also hoped that seeing one another's critiques would help raise the level of comment from the weaker contributors. This happened. Overall, we found that the creation of a "virtual" group contributed to a higher quality of criticism overall. We also found that although the criticisms became more focused and (to our mind) more useful as the semester progressed, the level of encouragement remained high. Thus peer critiques did not mean an end to peer support. Compliments, exhortations, and general enthusiasm came along with queries and calls for clarification. In the end, rather unexpectedly, some critiques even acted as a form

of peer support ("I found that hard, too...")

Of course, even in rural Somerset or the wilds of the Scottish Hebrides, electronic communication is cannot completely replace periodic face-to-face encounters. Hence our scheme represented a classic "hybrid" approach to IT. Sustaining the group ethos between meetings, however, was one important contribution made by the use of electronic resources, as was the possibility of students more easily viewing the contributions of their fellows.

Lessons Learned and Advice Offered

We were right to believe that student peer review of written work could be an effective supplement to our own feedback on student writing. However, in retrospect we were astoundingly naïve about what it would take to get the programme up and running. We thought that, like hounds straining on the leash, all you had to do was slip the leash and students would bound away in pursuit of that enticing quarry, peer review.

Of course as we soon discovered, only if students are "let into the secret" of why one might contemplate peer review in the first place are they even remotely interested. And only if they are properly trained and then given enough opportunities to practice does peer review really work. Our training, as outlined above, took the form of first explaining the rationale of having students comment on each other's writing, then taking aim at a neutral target (our manufactured "Ode to Autumn" essay) on which for students to practice, and finally giving them a template or rubric to guide their first steps as critics. Overall, the lessons we learned include the following:

• Students will not buy into the programme unless its rationale is

explained.

• The skills needed to offer useful advice can be learned, but students should not be allowed simply to develop them on their own in a hit or miss fashion. This is both inefficient and potentially hurtful to their peers.

• Articulate and reinforce even (or especially) those skills you think students have already mastered. (E.g. we needed to remind some what a topic sentence is.)

• Students need to know the "rules of the road" before they are allowed to comment on one another's work. Basic ground rules should be explained and understood.

• These rules include a strict prohibition on personal attacks (though in fact most students at first were reluctant to say anything critical and were thus "too nice"), the injunction to focus on the reader's response ("I feel confused about...") rather than suggestions ("you should say more about X..."), and to be specific.

• Have the author of each essay explain in a paragraph what she or he had as a goal— i.e. what the reader was supposed to get from the essay. This proved to be an essential tool for the "critics," since it allowed them to compare intent with execution.

• Given the upfront investment in training, we were keen to amortize this time by making peer review part of every written assignment (eight in all). It is not practical to do this simply once or twice a semester. Students will not have enough practice as "critics" in order to improve.

•Student feedback should be exclusively formative—i.e., it is not linked to the appraisal of student work by academic staff. Our marks were arrived at

independently from the students' feedback, and we made sure that everyone understood this.

• Failure to submit feedback by required deadline, however, resulted in points deducted from the final marks. We also made the argument of fairness, arguing that it wasn't fair for Sally to be deprived of feedback when everyone else had received theirs.

• Although students typically had only one essay on which to comment per week, an electronic forum allowing them access to one another's proved to be an important tool in improving the quality of comments (which continued to rise over the semester).

• Group cohesion was improved through the act of sharing advice, support, and complaints ("that last assignment was *really* hard...).

Conclusion

Student peer review of written work can be a powerful tool for improving not only the quality of student writing, but students' abilities as literary critics. Over the course of a semester, their "eye" can be sharpened so that they become connoisseurs of good written work—their own as well as that of others. But this excellent tool only works with sufficient preparation. Students do not naturally take to the role of critic; indeed, they shy away from commenting on their peers, both out of fear of alienating fellow students, and because they know they do not have the critical skills necessary for the job.

It is up to academic staff to ensure that the proper training takes place. In our experience it should be sequential and focused on those precise skills we want students to bring to bear on one another's work: an ability to sum up the

overall argument, to see how the essay is structured, to note moments of puzzlement or surprise, and to put one's own reactions into prose that is itself clear and respectful. If these conditions are met, the rewards of student peer review are substantial. Our experience has shown us that good and responsible student critics are made, not born, and that their contributions to the success of an introductory course more than repay the training required. This result dovetails with findings elsewhere in the UK and North America (Bostock, MacDowell and Mowl, Pelaez), and we are happy to add our findings to the consensus.

References

Biggs, J. 1999. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University,* Buckingham: SRHE and Open University. Bostock, S. 2000. Student peer assessment, *The Higher Education Academy*, Paladine, UK.

Cho, K and Schunn, CD. 2007. Scaffolded writing and rewriting in the discipline: A web-based reciprocal peer review system, *Computers and Education,* 48 (3) 409-436.

DiGiovanni, E and Nagaswami, G. 2001. On-line peer review: an alternative to face-to-face? ELT Journal 55 (3) 263-272.

Haaga, DAF. 1993. Peer review of term papers in graduate psychology courses, *Teaching of Psychology,* 20 (1) 28-32.

Jamsen, K. 2010. How *Do* You Make Peer Review Work? Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/page.jsp?id=29&c_type=category&c_id=21

Gehringer, EF. 2000. Strategies and mechanisms for electronic peer review. 30th Annual Frontiers in Education http://www.computer.org/portal/web/csdl/doi/10.1109/FIE.2000.897675.

Hartley, J. 1998. *Learning and Studying*. London: Routledge.

McDowell, L and Mowl, G. 1996. Innovative assessment — its impact on students, 131-147 in Gibbs, G. (ed.) *Improving student learning through assessment*

and evaluation. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.

MacLeod, L. 1999 Computer aided peer review of writing. *Business Communication Quarterly* 62 (3) 87-94.

Pelaez, N. 2002. Problem-based writing with peer review improves academic performance in physiology, *Advances in Physiology Education*, 26, 174-184.

Ramsden, P. 1992. Learning to Teach in Higher Education. London: Routledge.

Topping, K. 1998. Peer assessment between students in colleges and universities. Review of Educational Research, 68 (3) 249-276.

Zariski, A. 1996. Student peer assessment in tertiary education: Promise, perils and practice. In Abbott, J. and Willcoxson (Eds), *Teaching and Learning Within and Across Disciplines*, pp. 189- 200. Proceedings of the 5th Annual and Learning Forum, Murdoch University, February 1996. Perth: Murdoch University. http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/asu/pubs/tlf/tlf96/zaris189.html.

7. APPENDIX: OUR PRACTICE "ODE TO AUTUMN" ESSAY

Keats's Ode to Autumn: An Appreciation

John Keats's famous "Ode to Autumn" (date) is an outstanding example of the ode, which is a lyrical form designed to praise something. Here Keats is praising a season, which seems a little strange (can seasons really appreciate praise?), but once you accept the oddity of the premise, he does it very well. This is my favorite of his six odes, and the last one he wrote. (It would appear that his odes improved with practice.)

"Ode to Autumn" is written in three stanzas, with a rather complicated rhyme scheme: a b a b c d e d c c e. Keats begins by addressing Autumn as a "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," and then follows her around in various places that he associates with that particular season. These places turn out to be connected with farming. He starts with a farmer's cottage ("the vines that round thatch-eaves run") and then moves to a beehive, a granary floor, a field by a brook, and then a cider- press. All these places Keats associates with the harvest, which he associates with autumn. So it would make sense that "Autumn," as personified by Keats, would be at home there.

There is something heavy, sleepy, even, about the tone of the first two stanzas. "Drowsed with the fume of poppies," Keats writes, and then shows us Autumn sitting by the cider press I mentioned before, watching "the last oozings, hours by hours." (Doesn't Autumn have better things to do?) But if we were going to imagine the characteristics of Autumn as seen by Keats, they would include a sort of sleepy patience, coupled with producing agricultural stuff (the "mellow fruitfulness" of line 1).

The third stanza is something of a departure from the first two. It begins with questions about where the songs of spring are. Where are they? Well, they're gone, because it isn't spring anymore. Keats then hurries to reassure

"Autumn" that it's okay to just be Autumn: "think not of them, thou hast thy music, too." I thought it was interesting that Keats is trying to reassure Autumn, I guess because Spring has its future before it, and Autumn is on its way out. The "wailful choir of small gnats" provides Autumn's music, which seems rather pathetic, but then he adds crickets and some birds (robins and swallows) to the Autumn chorus, like getting a lead guitar and keyboard front for a whiny second guitar.

What's the take-home message of this ode? It's about fulfillment, I would argue, especially with all those images of harvest. And it's also about ending, maybe even dying, since Autumn is on its way out, like I said. There are many things to like about the poem, including all the images noted above. I also liked the internal rhymes. Keats seems to have a thing about internal rhymes, or at least he likes starting words with the same letter ("season of Mists and Mellow fruitfulness") what has a sort of music of its own. Keats's own life was short, since he died of tuberculosis, which could not be cured at that time. Maybe he was identifying with Autumn when he wrote his last ode.