write beside me | *effective peer response*

TRICIA EBARVIA
PWP 512-01
7 Dec 2011

Conestoga High School | Tredyffrin-Easttown SD | Permission to Publish: Yes | ebarviat@tesd.net

CONTENTS

RATIONALE

Providing students with feedback during the writing process is critical in their development as writers. Over the years, I've tried several strategies to do just that. As a teacher, I've broken down the writing process into smaller chunks—first an introduction, then the first paragraph, etc.—so that students are able to get feedback on individual components of their writing before a final product is due. During a typical class period in which students bring in a draft of their writing, I've had students exchange papers and complete a teacher-designed peer feedback sheet, while I walked around the room to provide additional feedback. At other times, I've also met with individual students outside of class for anywhere from 10 to 25 minutes. During these individual teacher-student conferences, I've helped students with a variety of issues, from idea generation to substantial revision for clarity and focus.

Although I've broken down the process to increase the frequency of feedback, given students peer editing opportunities, and met with individual students in teacher-student conferences, none—or even all—of these has been enough. I've found that the most effective feedback I've been able to provide is during one-on-one conferences, but because they are so time consuming, they are few and far between. To supplement, I've used peer editing during class as an additional opportunity for students to get feedback on their writing. Peer editing guidelines, however, are rather specific and act more as a checklist for students—for example, does the student have all three parts of their thesis statement included, does the student include an anecdote, etc.—rather than provide open and organic response.

As a result, I've often felt that my students get neither the quantity nor the quality of feedback that they need to truly develop as student writers. I became more convinced of this fact after participating in the 2011 Summer Writing Institute. During the Institute, I became immersed in the workshop approach to writing in which I worked with my colleagues in a response group to get feedback on my writing. Through these response groups, I received authentic and meaningful feedback on my writing while it was still developing. My response group listened to what I wrote, asked questions that emerged as they listened—their *own* questions, not questions determined by the teacher or the assignment—and offered specific suggestions to move the writing forward. Contrast this with the peer editing feedback my students typically got from each other—for example, "add more detail here" or "describe this part more"—and there was no question as to which type of feedback could be more effective.

Therefore, this year, I've decided to integrate student peer response groups into my classroom. Response groups will be initially modeled after those used in the Writing Institute. Not only do I hope that they will give students more authentic feedback about their writing and develop their writing skills, response groups will also help develop students' skills in listening, reading, and speaking, as they listen, read, and speak to one another regarding their work. In addition, given the increasing demands on teachers during the school day—not least of which was giving teachers an additional class to teach this year—developing students' conferring abilities is not only desired, but necessary. Students will, hopefully, become better respondents to each others' work as well as better respondents to their own work as they write.

Research Question

What happens when peer response groups are integrated into the writing process?

PROCESS

After participating in the Writing Institute last summer, I knew that I wanted to establish a true writing workshop model in my classroom, similar to what I had experienced and enjoyed myself. To do so, however, meant making time for students to read and respond to each other's writing. And I knew that this wasn't something that was going to happen naturally. I had to make time for it—to carve out those minutes here, there, and everywhere in my classroom to allow students to work together independently. To accomplish this, I decided to rethink my instructional schedule.

Conestoga HS runs on a six-day cycle. I decided to align my writing workshop model with this six-day schedule. On Days 1 and 2, we study a mentor text, often a longer essay from our textbook. On Day 3, I teach a mini-lesson on some aspect of rhetoric and/or style. On Days 4 and 5, students work on drafting and revising an essay they currently working on. On some days, this includes meeting in their response groups and getting feedback from their peers. On Day 6, we work on skills related directly to AP exam preparation.

To introduce the idea of peer response groups, I modeled a response group with two colleagues as my peer respondents. I read aloud a short draft of a piece I had been working on while my colleagues listened. We borrowed the *praise, ponder, polish* approach that I was first introduced to during the writing institute. One of my colleagues, Ben Smith, was also in the writing institute with me, so he was familiar with the process. My colleagues and I set up our chairs in the front of the room, and I explained the process to my students: while I read, my peer respondents would listen, write down *praise, ponder, polish* comments, and then share their feedback when I was finished. I then began to read my draft, a personal essay about a friend who had died in one of the Twin Towers on 9/11. This was the first time I had ever shared anything meaningful writing with my students. My hope in choosing such a personal subject was to show my students that their writing could be personal and yet still be shared with others.

After I finished reading, my colleagues offered their feedback, each taking a turn. The session then became a back-and-forth discussion about my draft as my colleagues asked questions and I responded. Students could see that the process was essentially *active* and *collaborative*. I wanted my students to see that this wasn't a one-way process in which feedback was given to me while I passively received it. My colleagues and I were actively involved in making my draft better. Modeling took about 15 minutes.

After modeling how a peer response group worked, I asked students to comment on what they observed about the process. Many students expressed genuine interest in the process; several students commented on how passionate and enthusiastic the feedback and discussion was (see Double Entry Notes for more on that). I then distributed a handout that further detailed guidelines regarding peer response (see Appendix A).

The next day, it was the students' turn. Students were asked to write two personal essays during the first marking period. We read a variety of personal and narrative essays in class, which served as our mentor texts. At the same time we read and discussed these texts, students were generating topics through brainstorming and pre-writing in their writer's notebooks. Promising ideas were then developed during in-class and at-home drafting.

Students met with the same response group of 3-4 students over the course of the marking period. This allowed students to meet to discuss both personal essays. (To read more details about how I implemented the response group process, please see FAQ section.)

Context

The school | Conestoga High School, located in suburban Philadelphia, is a public high school that serves more than 2000 students in grades 9 through 12. By nearly all measurements, the school can be considered successful: the school is consistently recognized among the best in the country, recognized among the top 100 high schools in the country, according to the previous U.S. News and World Report rankings. With above-average SAT scores and 48% student participation in AP courses, more than 90% of Conestoga graduates attend four-year colleges.

The students | For the purposes of this inquiry, I will focus on my AP Language & Composition course. I teach three sections of this course for a total of 61 students, all of whom (with one exception) are juniors. Students in this course are generally high academic achievers and motivated either to learn or get good grades or both. However, although such students have experienced success in school, their experience thus far in writing has been in writing *as response to literature*; in other words, literature has been the subject of their English study, while writing has mostly served as a vehicle for reading. In the AP Language & Composition course, however, writing itself is the subject; writing is both subject and tool.

Up to this point, students have had little experience working in peer response groups.

DOUBLE ENTRY NOTEBOOK

Writers need lots of readers; it broadens perspective. Plus, I just can't read and reread each student's work as much as they need me to. If I don't create a group of good respondents, students will learn less Penny Kittle, *Write Beside Them*	This year, because of budget constraints, each high school teacher has been assigned to teach six classes instead of five. This change represents, roughly, a 20% increase in students, while at the same time, a 50% reduction in planning time (to make room for the sixth class, 1 of 2 previous planning periods was taken away). Although I've always felt like I never had enough time to give feedback to students, this year that feeling has intensified. In the ideal world, I'd be able to give each student at least some minimal feedback on their writing while they are still in the writing process. Otherwise, if the first time I read their writing is when it's "finished," it is often already too late for students to revise—either because the assignment is due and we've moved on, or because they are so far into the process that they feel committed to what they've written, no matter how badly. Like Kittle, I simply don't have enough time to give the feedback my students need to develop. I am, after all, just one person. However, they do have each other. By giving students the opportunity to read and respond to each other's work, they will get additional feedback that they would not otherwise have in the process. I also appreciate Kittle's point about writers needing "lots of readers." When students know that they have other readers aside from their teacher, they not only get more varied feedback, but they are also more invested in their writing when they know that their peers will read and respond to it.

Orla: "Do English teachers really talk like that?" *Me:* "What do you mean?" *Orla:* "Like all deep, you know? About symbolism and all those big words?" *Me:* "Yes… I guess so." *Orla:* "It's just weird." *Me:* "Yes, that's how we would talk to each other if we had that conversation in, let's say, the department room." Class discussion after response group modeling, 10/3	After modeling peer response with my own colleagues on a piece of writing I had prepared for class, one student, Orla, asked, "Do English teachers really talk like that?" The class laughed when she asked, not because they thought her question was silly, but because they were all thinking the same thing. She—along with the rest of the class—were genuinely surprised by and in awe of the way that my colleagues and I discussed a piece of writing. When I asked for clarification as to why our conversation seemed so strange to them, other students also chimed in. They seemed to be struck by how passionately we spoke about the writing as well as by the specificity of our responses to one another. As our discussions continued, I asked students what they thought of the response group—what did they notice about how it worked, etc. Several students again noted the seriousness with which we undertook the process, while another student noted how "personal" the process was, not only because of the topic (my essay was about a friend I had lost during 9/11), but also because of the ways in which my colleagues and I discussed it. While I knew that seeing a model peer response session would be beneficial to students, I don't think I truly appreciated what modeling would really mean to them until we actually did it. I did choose a topic that was rather personal (the death of my friend) because I wanted students to be able to see that peer response groups should be safe place for them to share about the things that they care about—which are, more often than not, deeply personal. Another benefit to modeling peer response would be to show students simply how the protocol worked. Things that seem second nature to adults—how to listen intently, when to speak up, when to ask a question, knowing whose turn it is, how to write notes as you listen—are not skills that my students are necessarily adept at doing.

Heather's response group is already at work. They are sitting comfortably on the floor in the hallway in close proximity to one another. Heather is reading. The two other girls in her group, meanwhile, alternate between listening and writing notes down on their stick notes for her. Farther down the hallway, Aubrey's group is sprawled out on the floor. Amanda is lying down as she listens, elbows propped up, pen in hand. Even from here, I can see their eyes darting among each other. There's a nervous laugh from the group. Courtney smiles; it appears she's agreed to go first. Closer to the room, but also in the hallway, is Nick's group. This group is composed of three boys. They, too, sit on the floor. Nick laughs nervously and says, "Yeah, I'm not going first" and then a moment later, "Mine's really bad." I can't hear what Stephen says, but the group laughs a little. There are a few smiles between them, but there's also some momentary silence as I approach. As I walk passed, I hear Hao murmer, "Okay, I'll go." As I turn the corner down the hall, I see another group of three girls sitting by the window. Alyssa is already reading her essay while the two others are listening and taking notes. Journal notes, 10/03/11	Asking students to response effectively to one another is a tricky business—a balance between allowing them to be independent but still keeping them accountable. I noticed today that every time I approached a response group, students' body language tensed up. If the group had veered off topic, they quickly got back on topic. Other groups, even if they were on topic, grew quiet when I approached. The truth is, what I saw walking around today was what I expected. I expected that some groups, like the first (Heather's) and last (Alyssa's) would immediately get to work with very little prompting or direction from me. In both groups were serious students who, while perhaps not quite friendly with each other yet, didn't let any discomfort they may have had get in their way. In fact, they are the type of students who get to work right away precisely because they would be more uncomfortable *not* getting to the task immediately. They deal with stress—and stressful situations like this one—by doing what they are told. It also helps, I imagine, that these students were also the type who seemed to trust in the process. I also expected some groups, like the second one (Aubrey's), to be a little more hesitant, but to eventually get to work. There was some nervous laughter among them, and even from down the hall could I see their eyes meeting each other's, as if to say, *no, you go first*. Without any prompting from me, except perhaps for the quick look I made in their direction, they did get to work and I could hear Courtney begin reading her essay. As she started to read, you could see the body language among her peers relax, shoulders slouching forward. And finally, Nick's group. This was one group I was worried about. They were talking when I walked by, but not about the assignment (at least not that I could tell). Their voices were lowered, and it seemed even more so whenever I approached. This group seemed, more than any of the others, to tense up when I was close by. Although this group of boys is friendly with one another, they don't seem to be comfortable sharing. Nick, in particular, seemed nervous. Perhaps as defense mechanism, he told his group that his essay is "so bad." When I asked them later if everything was going okay, they look quickly at each other and then respond with half-hearted "yeah"s. I really tried to stay out of the students' way today for our first attempt at peer response. At this point, it doesn't seem like I have to hover over them; in fact, I have a feeling that doing so would stifle their process and not allow them to get to know each other and each other's writing. On the other hand, I wanted to make sure I walked up and down the hallway just so that they knew I was around and that my expectations were that they be working the entire time together instead of fooling around. Perhaps it's a matter of trust. I would love to get to the point where I could trust them to work together without even having to check up on them. Then again, they are teenagers and without some direction (and accountability), it may be too tempting for them to lose their way.

• "Good diction and syntax" • "Good pathos" • "Good examples, quotes" • "Good connection to being clumsy" • "Love the childlike language and hyperbole" • "I liked how you used the bike wheel to describe frustration" • "Good description of cooties as an epidemic" Examples of student *praise* (from first response group session)	At the left are typical of the *praise* responses students gave to each other during the first response group sessions. The responses generally fell into three categories: 1) vague and generic (the first three comments), 2) general but helpful (fourth and fifth comments), and 3) specific (the last two comments). As I looked through their *praise* responses to one another, I noticed that most actually fell into the first category, *vague and generic*, which initially surprised me. However, after some reflection, I realized that students actually have very little experience in pointing out or seeing the effectiveness of their own writing. In fact, stronger student writers tend to write the way they do *naturally* or without much forethought. At some point—perhaps because these stronger writers tend to be the stronger readers—they've absorbed more sophisticated sentence structures and applied to their own writing. As such, they don't naturally *see* how what they do in their writing is effective. Therefore, they may not *see* that effectiveness in other students' work as well. Instead, they revert to more *vague and generic* comments like "good diction and syntax" or "good examples." In other words, they don't know how to offer specific and helpful praise.
• "Add more action" • "Description and details needed" • "Add more rhetorical devices" • "Give more background" • "What is the true purpose of your essay?" • "Is your essay about dancing or your friend?" • "How does describing grade school connect to your points?" • "Look at the transition from narrative to analysis" • "Sounds [like you're] complaining. Make it more logical. People will respect you." Examples of student *ponder* and *polish* (from first response group session)	Like the *praise* comments recorded above, the *polish* and *ponder* comments at the left represent what was typical of student responses. Student responses varied from vague ("Add more action") to the specific ("Is your essay about dancing or your friend?") and everything in between ("Give more background" and "What is the true purpose of your essay?"). Unlike the *praise* comments, however, the *polish* and *ponder* comments were generally more specific and helpful. In particular, I was happy to see that several of their responses were in the form of questions that seemed to identify an essential weakness in the writing. For example, the question, "Is your essay about dancing or your friend?" indicated that the essay must have had a focus issue. In fact, when I overheard the student writer reading this particular essay, I had that same question in my mind as well, so I was glad to see that it appeared in the feedback from her peers. The comment about "the transition from narrative to analysis" was equally apt. Yes, I was disappointed with comments such as "Add more rhetorical devices" and "Add more action." But if I am honest with myself, I have to admit that I have been guilty of giving equally vague feedback to students in their writing over the years as well. Furthermore, the fact that students are giving each other generic feedback only confirms that they've received that kind of feedback, if not from me, but from the other English teachers they've had along the way. Actually, as I look at the more generic feedback, I start to feel guilty for passing along that same generic feedback to my students over the years. At least my students have an excuse: they're students. I'm the teacher: what's my excuse? It seems more and more clear to me that if we want students to be effective at not only giving feedback to each other but also internalizing what comprises effective feedback, then we need to model it for them when we give feedback on their writing.

Katy: "So I'm writing about how I moved, but I'm not sure where this is going." *Me*: "Okay, well, why do you want to write about this?" *Katy*: "I think because it meant a lot to me. I went through a lot, and I think I changed as a person. It really made me grow." *Me:* "It what way?" *Katy:* "Well, moving and changing schools was a big deal. Everyone in my family went to [other school], and it was always just expected that I go there, too. So when I decided to come here to Conestoga, it was a big change." *Me*: "Okay, well, let's see…" I look through her essay and notice that while Katy has described how her entire family had gone to another school, and how her experiences being a new student affected her, nowhere in the essay does she indicate *why* she decided to change schools. *Me:* "Well, I think you do a nice job expressing how big of a change your decision to move was for you. But as I read, I can't help but wonder what made you decide to change schools. That part is missing for me. Was there a reason you moved?" Katy pauses. *Katy:* "Well, there was, but it's kind of personal, so I didn't want to include it." Teacher-Student Conference, 10/5/11	A few days after our first peer response sessions, Katy asked to see me about her paper. Although I was hoping that having peer response groups would provide students with help on their writing—and thus not have students depend as much on me for feedback—Katy's request to see me could only mean that she wasn't getting what she needed from her response group. Katy happened to be in one of the response groups that seemed to run rather smoothly, at least at first glance. I knew the other two students in her group to be strong writers and, more importantly, helpful and eager to help. I could see a student in a group with less capable writers coming to see me for help, so I was a little concerned when Katy approached me. However, after meeting with Katy, I realized that at the end of the day, getting feedback from peers is simply not the same as getting feedback from a teacher. The feedback Katy got from her peers was specific enough, but I could tell that she still felt unsure about the direction of her essay. I asked Katy to tell me about her essay. She took it out and summarized the "gist" of it while I thumbed through. As we talked more about her essay, she seemed earnest and eager to work on it. Within a few minutes, however, I realized that there was a big piece missing from her essay, which was some background information. Katy had written a nice piece on why moving to public school from private school was such a big adjustment. She alluded several times in her essay to what a "big deal" it was for her to go to public school when all her other family members had gone to private, Catholic school. While she spoke of how significant of an adjustment this was for her, nowhere in her essay did she describe *why* she made the decision in the first place. To me, that seemed integral. Katy immediately responded that she didn't want to go into that because it was a personal matter. And there it was: that crucial information that the essay needed in order to make "sense" for the reader but that Katy was unwilling to share. Her peer response group didn't pick up on this; when I looked at their feedback, they responded more to what she had on the page rather than what was missing. I could understand how they could miss that; after all, I also missed that after my initial reading of Katy's piece, and it was only after some prodding that I got her to see where the essay was lacking. I learned a few things in my interaction with Katy. One: there's no replacing a teacher's experience when it comes to providing feedback. I saw what her peers did and, perhaps, could not. Second: sometimes students simply feel more comfortable talking through their thoughts and their writing with a teacher. Katy needed the kind of one-on-one attention with a teacher that even the best peer respondents in the class couldn't provide.

Students are currently working in their response groups getting feedback on their second personal essay. Sarah is reading her essay aloud to Anna (their third group member is absent today). As Sarah reads, she stops periodically to make changes to her essay. Anna is listening fairly intently, while at the same time doodling in her notebook as well as taking some notes on the stickies. Sarah says something funny in her essay, and Anna laughs and points it out. There seems to be a nice camaraderie going on between them. Sarah reads quickly, but she seems fairly comfortable sharing her writing. Every once in a while, a giggle emerges from the group. When Sarah is finished, Anna begins reading and explaining her comments. As Anna goes through her comments, Sarah asks questions and also writes notes to herself directly on her paper. Most of Anna's comments are specific, often quoting back excerpts from Sarah's essay that she liked or had questions about. Journal notes, 10/20/11	Based on Sarah and Anna's interactions, it looks like peer response groups are running fairly smoothly. I worried at first that this group—three girls who are also good friends—would wander off task and lose focus amidst their giggles (they did tend to laugh a lot, especially when I wasn't around but still within earshot). And yet after Sarah was finished reading her piece, I was pleasantly surprised by Anna's feedback and the discussion that ensued. When Anna gave Sarah some feedback, Sarah asked questions about how she should make the changes. The two students seemed to work together on her writing in a truly collaborative process. Both students seemed genuinely interested in hearing what the other had to say. Although I think much of their camaraderie was a result of their friendship, I don't know that it's necessarily true that friends make the best peer respondents. I'm sure what also helped the process along was the fact that this was the second time students met in their response groups. Having gone through the process once, students seemed much more comfortable sharing their work.

Alex volunteers to go next. She tells the group that she changed topics since the last time they met. She begins to read as the group listens. Her group consists of three other girls. There is an immediate sense of ease and comfort in this group. They listen and take notes as she reads. They sit in the hallway stairwell, two against each wall, facing each other.

When Alex finishes reading, the group takes a few minutes to write down their thoughts on their post-its. After a moment, Catherine makes eye contact with Alex and says that she will start.

Caroline begins with what she liked in the piece. In fact, she tells Alex that she "liked this piece a lot better than the other one she was working on." Alex laughs and agrees. Caroline remarks that she liked hearing about Alex's trip, and comments, "Even though I knew you went to Africa last summer, I didn't really know why or how it really went, so I liked that I got to hear about that").

Caroline goes on to express what she liked (for example, the unexpectedness of the opening anecdote), but as she does so, she also starts to delve into the "ponder" questions she has. She asks Alex—whose essay is about her recent trip to Africa—about how she ended up going to Africa in the first place. She also asks for clarification on who "Patrick" is in the essay (Was he the tour guide or some other person?). The other girls murmur and nod in agreement with Caroline; Alex answers the questions and simultaneously makes notes to herself on her paper and then asks for clarification from the group about the advice she is hearing from them ("So I should make sure that I say who he is early in the piece" and "Where do you think I should put that information?").

I'm impressed by how well this particular response group is working. This group of girls are close friends, and every time I've walked by them, their discussion is animated. I admit that I've wondered how productive (or not) they are. My gut reaction when I hear students laughing is that they must be off task, especially if those students are teenagers.

Now, I can't be 100% certain of what happens in this group when I'm not sitting in on their discussion, but based on what I observed today, I was pleasantly surprised. In fact, the more I think about it, I'm fairly confident that this has probably been just as effective when I wasn't eavesdropping as when I was today. If they hadn't been working well together, I think it would have shown. Instead, the students had a comfortable give-and-take discussion. There was no hesitation as to who should speak first, what could or could not be said. In fact, as I look back on the feedback Alex received from her peers, much of it was more on the polish and ponder side. Yes, there were some nice things in her essay that could be praised, but the essay lacked the key focus that it needed to give it shape. (The essay, at this point, was a typical "bed to bed" essay about Alex's trip to Africa. While she described various parts of the trip, the descriptions and details did not really add up to a particular point.)

As Alex read her essay, I also wrote down my own set of *praise, polish,* and *ponder* comments. Every one of my concerns was brought up by her peers; I didn't need to say anything. What was more impressive for me, however, was how supportive and honest the feedback came across. Alex was also very receptive to her group's feedback, making detailed notes as they shared.

When Caroline is finished, Kari goes next, beginning with the things she also liked, specifically referencing how she agreed with much of what Caroline has already said. Kari suggests to Alex that she focus more on the purpose of her trip and use that to determine what she'll describe. She specifically says to "paint more of a picture in the reader's mind" because "all the villages seemed the same" to her in the way that Alex described them. The response group continues in much the same manner, with each student offering her feedback and building on what had already been said. Journal Notes, 10/27/11	

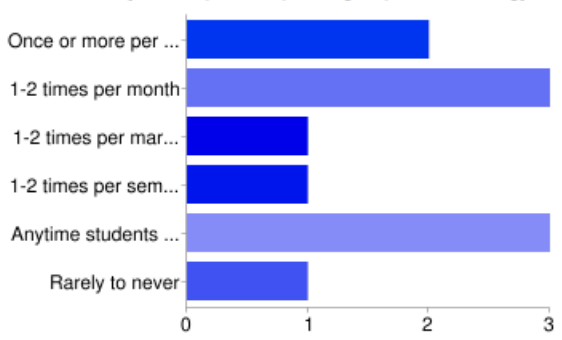
INTERVIEWS

Ask anyone who teaches English about the challenges of teaching writing and most will agree that the amount of grading is the English teacher's cross to bear. With so many papers to grade and students to help, providing students with effective feedback in a timely manner can sometimes seem impossible. Yet research has consistently shown that for feedback to be effective, it must be given to students while "there is still enough time to act on it" (Brookhart). For English teachers, this means either collecting and commenting on student drafts or conferring with students during the writing process. Unfortunately, given the increasing demands on teacher time during the school day, the amount and quality of this type of formative assessment is lacking.

If, however, students could be taught to provide more meaningful feedback to each other, then the burden—or put more accurately, the responsibility—of improving student writing can be shared. Unfortunately, despite this fact, my students are seldom given enough time to respond to each other's writing, much less explicitly taught how to be effective peer respondents. And I had a feeling I wasn't alone in this.

To determine teacher attitudes and practices regarding peer response, I sent out an online survey to my department colleagues. Of the 18 full-time members of the department, 11 teachers responded with their thoughts.

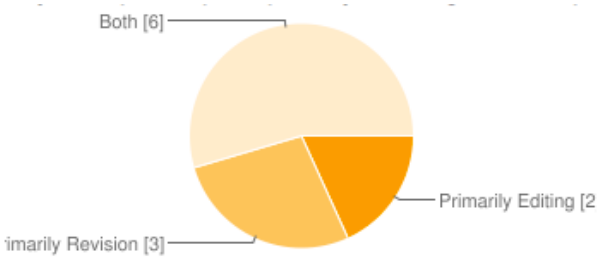
Question 1 How often do you use peer response groups as a strategy to help students revise or edit their writing?



Once or more per week/cycle	2	18%
1-2 times per month	3	27%
1-2 times per marking period	1	9%
1-2 times per semester	1	9%
Anytime students submit a major writing assignment	3	27%
Rarely to never	1	9%

The results here were encouraging. Of the teachers who responded, almost half (45%) used peer response groups at least 1-2 per month if not more, and nearly a third (27%) used peer response groups whenever students had to submit a major writing assignment. Only 1 teacher (9%) said he/she rarely or never used peer response groups. These results were in line with what I've observed among teachers in my department; I have seen many teachers use peer editing or revision guides as part of the writing process.

Question 2 Do you use peer response primarily for editing or revision purposes?



Primarily Editing	**2**	18%
Primarily Revision	**3**	27%
Both	**6**	55%

I asked this question because I wanted to draw attention to the distinction between using peer response groups for the purpose of editing (which would occur later in the writing process) versus revision (which would start early in the process and occur throughout). I know that traditionally I have asked students to respond to each other's work both for editing and revision purposes. However, when I look back on past peer response sheets, most of the question are structured in such a way that they act more like checklist of things students should look out for. For example, one peer response sheet I've used asks students to make sure that the student's thesis statement is in parallel structure or that the student has used the right punctuation to integrate primary sources. Perhaps there will be one or two questions that refer to content—for example, asking students to determine if the text cited is the best example to support their peers' thesis—but more often than not, these questions are designed to be answered in a yes or no, or present or not present format.

While I may *technically* be able to argue that such peer response sheets promote both editing and revision, I know now that that's simply not true. First, because revision takes place *early, often,* and *during* the writing process, it would be counterproductive to ask any questions related to editing since that process takes place typically at the very *end* of the writing process. Asking students to edit material whose content may be changed substantially doesn't serve any purpose except further binding the student to the writing. Students believe because they have "corrected" their work, it must be correct, whereas in some cases, the issue is not about technical, mechanical or grammatical correctness, but about larger issues such as focus and content.

The results seem to indicate that my colleagues use peer response as method for revision, sometimes with editing and sometimes by itself. I wonder how much I can depend on this data since the definition of what constitutes revision versus editing may differ from teacher to teacher. Follow-up questions would be necessary to determine to what extent true revision versus simple editing is happening when peer response groups are used.

Question 3 When you use peer response groups, what factors do you consider when grouping and organizing students?

Answers included

A. I pair students of similar ability.
B. Students are grouped by writing ability. I pair each student with a student of similar ability. I never put a strong writer with a weak writer.
C. Often, I try to group them based on topic or ability.
D. Proximity to one another/common topic or thesis/randomness. giving a strong student a weaker student's paper and vice versa
E. Eventually with a mix of strong and weaker students, but more often based on my idea of who might work well together--personality wise or general comfort.

F. I consider individual strengths and weaknesses. In particular, I might put together students with a similar problem because when they see the problem in someone else's writing it is easier to identify when it occurs in their own paper. I consider the respect they accord each other. I consider the way they have used their time in class doing other work and group a time saver with a time waster.
G. I try to do it randomly, but I am conscious of putting a struggling writer with a stronger writer.
H. My grouping decisions depend on the assignment and the time of the year. In the beginning of the year, I allow more student choice in groups so that they feel comfortable sharing their writing. As the year continues and the class becomes more of a community, I choose groups based on student needs. (i.e. two or more strong writer's to support each other grouped with a writer or two who would benefit from hearing strong student writing.)
I. Individual students' writing levels, Gender, Discipline, leadership
J. I allow students to choose their own partners for peer-editing. (My ninth grade classes contain students with a wide range of ability levels. Some students in my classes are uncomfortable with social interaction. I want to make sure that my students feel comfortable with their partners. I want to avoid any situations that might result in teasing or bullying.)
K. I will sometimes do it randomly, sometimes by proximity, and other times by I'll pair strong students with weak, or strong-strong / weak-weak. It depends on the purpose of the response and also somtimes on class management.

Teacher responses varied, but most seemed to take care to pay attention to the ability levels of students (by pairing complementary students together such as weaker-stronger or similarly-abled students). In some cases, students are grouped or paired regardless of ability, whether it's by proximity (Teacher D) or by personality (Teachers H and J). In the past, I have typically grouped students by proximity (those sitting next to or near one another), but since I assign students desks, and because I assign their desks based on their personalities, peer response groups are organized by what I perceive to be students' overall personalities or needs.

Question 3 What challenges or obstacles have you faced when using peer response?

Answers included

A. I don't think most students are really willing to look at another student's writing and honestly evaluate it- They merely look at the writing on a surface level. Technical problems arise as well- sometimes students are absent or unprepared.
B. They do not take it seriously. Sometimes their advice is really wrong.
C. Sometimes I will get "the blind leading the blind."
D. Some "editors" offer their "writers" faulty advice. Some students aren't sophisticated enough writers to understand what they are looking for.
E. Getting the writer to really listen to the feedback and deal with it. Generally, the feedback is pretty good, but sometimes the writer just wants to get his presentation over with and might not consider what the feedback is really asking him to do. Getting them beyond the editing/ proofreading stage.
F. The biggest challenge comes from the student who only values feedback from an adult. The second biggest challenge comes from the student who feels that he has no peer in the class and thus cannot learn anything in these sessions. These are two separate problems: often the student who only wants feedback from an adult is a weak one who might be embarrassed by having a classmate look at a paper that still needs work.
G. In ninth grade, they are pretty conscientious, but lack the depth needed to truly impact the quality of the piece.
H. The most challenging part for me is teaching students how to give meaningful feedback. Also, it is when a group rushes through workshop time.
I. Keeping students on task, giving valuable feedback, making sure every student participates and is heard in each group
J. Because I allow my students to choose their own partners, I have to structure the peer-edit in a way that facilitates serious peer-editing (instead of socializing). So, I let the students choose their own partners, but then I instruct them to their assigned seats. They provide written

feedback (not verbal feedback) using a peer-editing check-list I have made that guides them through the peer-editing process.

K. Developing strong readers is the biggest challenge. I want the reader to be demanding, but weaker writers won't have high expectations of others because they don't necessarily have high expectations of their own work.

Because of the potential benefits of peer response groups, especially for the teacher who can now share the burden of revision and formative assessment with the students, I was eager to see what challenges teachers felt that they faced in trying to use peer response groups. What is notable is the amount of control that some teachers feel they need to exert over the peer response process. I, too, am guilty of this. In fact, I share Teacher J's sentiment that she needs "to structure the peer-edit in a way that facilitates serious peer-editing (instead of socializing)." The fear that students would use the time so simply socialize was exactly what I felt when I put students in their peer response groups for the first time this year (see Double Entry Journal 1 and 8).

The differences in ability seem to weigh heavily on teachers' minds, as several feared that weaker writers would not be able to provide feedback to their stronger peers. I can see how teachers would find this challenging and discourage them from using peer response. After all, if students don't see the value in peer response, then they are unlikely to put forth the effort required to give effective feedback. When students aren't given effective feedback, it further invalidates or undermines the potential benefits of peer response, both to the writer and respondent. The cycle continues in which any "trust" in the writing process becomes further eroded. Particularly worrisome is if one student offers another "faulty advice" that sometimes is "just really wrong" (Teachers B and D). It is no wonder, then, that Teacher C described the peer response process as "the blind leading the blind."

In fact, "the blind leading the blind" seems to be the most common challenge faced by nearly all the teachers. It makes sense; after all, if the students don't know what they're doing, then how can they help their peers? The thinking goes something like this: if they were good writers in the first place, then they shouldn't need to depend on their peers for revision and editing. But they aren't good writers, and therefore, they need the help of their peers. And if that's true, then how can students who need help offer help with that which they themselves struggle?

Of course, this assumes that unless students are good writers—however you measure or define "good"—then they cannot respond to someone else's writing. Well, that's certainly not true. Students who are struggling writers nevertheless read and evaluate writing all the time when they read. Even if students may not have mastered certain skills, they can still offer a general or even specific response to their peers' work and at many different levels.

Question 4 In your experience, what factors contribute to effective peer response?

Answers included

A. Well prepared students. Specific "things" to look for or guided editing. Students well paired.
B. Higher level students, serious writers help make peer editing more effective.
C. Student ability, interest, and motivation
D. Having a strong student work with a weaker student. having a step-by-step handout for students to follow and interact with.
E. Good combo of kids, clear tasks, things to fill out, post-its, a directed approach.
F. The most important factor is preparing students. They need to see model peer responses; they need to come prepared with specific questions about their papers. They need to be schooled in diplomacy as well--no one wants his or her work denigrated, no matter how little time went into the product!
G. An encouraging environment where students do not feel they are being judged or made to feel bad about their writing.
H. I think modeling good workshopping is key, but also being comfortable with each other helps.
I. A well-structured plan, Assigning roles for each person in the group, Providing a limited and specific number of features of writing that the students are to look for, edit, or respond to

(particularly effective following a lesson(s) on those features), Assigning a grade to the response and having something to complete that demonstrates their participation and feedback.

J. Students need structure. They need check-lists or rubrics that instruct them to look for particular kinds of errors. Essentially, they need to be taught how to peer-edit. Also, I give a 20 point participation grade for the peer-edit. Students who do not have their typed papers that day receive a zero. The grade (and possible consequence of a zero) helps ensure that all students arrive prepared with their typed papers on peer-edit day.
K. Preceding the response with whole class modeling.

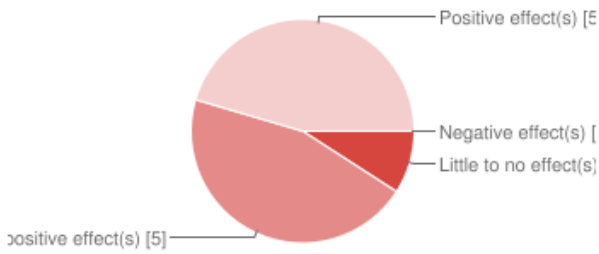
Whatever obstacles or challenges teachers said they faced when using peer response groups, it was their exact opposite, teachers claimed, that made peer response work. For example, if a challenge cited was that students did not take the process seriously, then a factor that contributed to positive peer response was student "motivation" (Teacher C) as well as a classroom culture in which everyone was respected and expected to contribute (Teachers F, G, and H). If teachers were worried that students didn't know what they were doing, then modeling (Teacher K) was the necessary antidote. Or if teachers worried that students may spend their time socializing, then adding more structure— such as assigning roles to each person (Teacher I) or having a checklist or rubric (Teacher J)—to the peer response process was the best medicine.

Question 5 In your experience, how does peer response help or hurt student writing?

Answers included

A. I'm not sure peer response helps student writing- but I don't think it hurts it either.
B. Depending on the students' abilities it can help.
C. When effective, peer response can reinforce(or even teach) skills.
D. When a student receives faulty advice, it confuses him.
E. It helps; especially forcing readers to read out loud to an audience.
F. Students are better able to recognize problems in their own writing after working with another student. Students gain confidence in their own writing decisions after working with another student, both from the praise of their writing and from their ability to help someone else. It can hurt students if there is inadequate preparation, either because students get a false sense of satisfaction or because they get bad advice.
G. I'm not sure if it makes a difference either way—it seems that many kids are just going through the motions.
H. I think it always helps to hear what others hear in your writing. In other words, it is important to hear if what the author intended is what the reader perceived.
I. Depending upon the group, peer response can be quite beneficial. On the down side, some groups will take the task less seriously and waste time, or they may provide inaccurate feedback or very limited feedback.
J. Peer response helps students writing. Students receive feedback regarding their own writing. Plus, I think that they learn about writing as they learn to edit the writing of others. They see models of good writing if they edit a well-written essay. If they edit a poorly written essay, they learn to recognize when writing is not well done and have to consider how to improve those pieces of writing.
K. It definitely helps significantly. It allows the writers to understand the effect of their writing on an audience. Without this feedback, the writing is less authentic since there is often no sense of audience for students in an academic setting.

Question 6 In your experience, what effect do peer response groups have on student writing?



Negative effect(s)	0	0%
Little to no effect(s)	1	9%
Some positive effect(s)	5	45%
Positive effect(s)	5	45%

As I look at the responses to questions 5 and 6, it's clear that despite the possible challenges, teachers overwhelmingly feel that peer response groups have at least some positive effect on student writing. At the very least, as Teacher A put it, "I'm not sure peer response helps student writing—but I don't think it hurts it either." Thus, with the exception of Teacher B, who pointed out (perhaps rightfully so) that "When a student receives faulty advice, it confuses him," most teachers felt that peer response groups do more good than harm.

Teacher K touched on an important point, one that echoes a belief expressed by Kelly Gallagher in *Teaching Adolescent Writers*. Teacher K notes that a peer response group "allows the writers to understand the effect of their writing on an audience. Without this feedback," Teacher K continues, "the writing is less authentic since there is often no sense of audience for students in an academic setting." Similarly, Gallagher argues that one of the necessary "pillars" for student writers is "to write for authentic purposes and for authentic audiences." What could be more authentic—and meaningful—of an audience for students than their own peers?

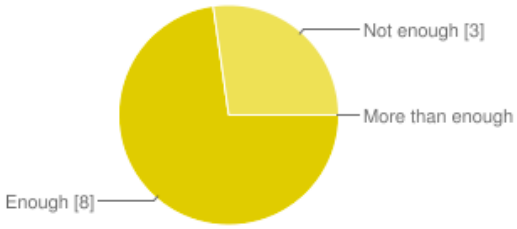
Question 7 What types of support do you give students to help them respond to each other's writing?

Answers included

A. Guided peer editing, modeling
B. Modeling definitely!
C. I review student samples on the overhead frequently, and also give a guided peer editing/ revision sheet.
D. Guided peer editing sheet, modeling, direct instruction with colored pencils. I also do something I call "group therapy." A student volunteers to have his paper displayed with the doc cam and the class, as a whole, offers feedback. Kids seem to like it/benefit from it.
E. A sheet, some modeling, a Post-It, a recap, etc.
F. Modeling, Peer editing worksheet, Step-by-step guide, Key phrases to remember (praise,ponder, polish or TAG-Tell something you liked; Ask a question; Give a suggestion.)
G. A detailed checklist with samples/models of correct forms of writing.
H. Praise, Ponder, Polish, Specific focused revisions
I. Modeling for the most part
J. —
K. Guided peer review handout, modeling, one-on-one support

Here, the strategy that seems to be employed most often by teachers was the use of modeling and guided, structured supports such as peer editing sheets and other handouts.

Question 8 Which of the following best describes your feelings toward how often you use peer response groups?



Enough	**8**	73%
Not enough	**3**	27%
More than enough	**0**	0%

Most teachers (73%) believed that they used peer response groups enough while the remaining teachers believed they could use peer response groups more in the classroom. No teachers felt that they overused peer response groups.

Overall, teacher responses indicated that while they understood the benefits of peer response groups, they expressed many concerns about the challenges they faced when trying to use them. Are teachers then saying that they are using peer response groups "enough" because they've taken them as far as they are willing or feel comfortable doing, regardless of how effective they are or can be? Or are teachers saying that they are using them enough because they are working well for them and have found the ideal amount of time to spend on them? In other words, is "enough" really enough?

As far as the teachers who say they are not using peer response enough, why not? Is it because they don't have the time in class or because they haven't made the commitment to implement them? Or is it because the challenges they cited (Question 3) are too difficult to overcome for them to use peer response groups any more than they already do? These are questions that can be pursued further in follow-up study.

FAQS

1 | What are peer response groups? How are peer response groups organized or structured?

Peer response groups are when students are grouped together with the specific purpose of sharing their writing and receiving feedback from their peers. Response groups are typically no bigger than 3-4 students per group; any more than that and the feedback can become overwhelming and sessions too long. Ideally, three students per group would allow each student 12-15 minutes to share and receive feedback within a 43-minute class period.

How response groups are organized are up to the discretion of the teacher. Some teachers choose to group students by similar ability levels, while others choose to mix the groups so that a variety of student ability levels are present (see Interviews, Question 3).

Although the ultimate purpose of response groups is to improve student writing, how the response groups work can vary depending on the specific educational purpose and/or learning goal. For example, in *Engaging Ideas*, Professor John C. Bean suggests that there are at least two types of response groups with two different purposes: response-centered reviews and advice-centered reviews. In a response-centered reviews, students take turns reading their drafts. Their peers then "simply describe their reactions to the piece." The writer, meanwhile, takes notes, but does not speak nor try to defend or explain what they wrote. As students give their responses, Bean points out, the writer often "receives contradictory messages: one reader might like a given passage, while another dislikes it. Thus, the group send the writer equivocal, ambiguous messages that reflect the truth about how real readers respond to real writing, leaving the writer responsible for deciding what to do" (224).

However, in an advice-centered review, students are tasked with looking at the writer's draft with specific focus areas in mind. Sometimes this can be in the form of a checklist, as some of my own colleagues described using (Interview, Question 4). In advice-centered review, the other students in the group are responsible for determining whether or not the writing meets the standards as required by the teacher and/or assignment. Students work together to evaluate the writing against a set standard. On the other hand, in response-centered review, it is the student writer who determines what his/her own standards are. For example, the student may ask herself: Based on what I'm hearing from my peers, has my writing achieved the effect I intended? From here, the student then decides what revisions to make based on the varied responses—again, not advice—from his peers.

In my classroom, I used a structure based on the *Praise, Question, Polish* (PQP) model as described in Gloria A. Neubert and Sally J. McNelis' in "Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Strategies." Neubert and McNelis' approach combines the authentic response of Bean's response-centered review with the specific suggestions for improvement in the advice-centered review. As Neubert and McNelis write, the "PQP technique requires group members (usually two to five per group) to take turns reading their drafts aloud as the other students follow along with copies. . . . The responders then react to the piece by writing comments on the PQP form." The PQP form consists of three categories:

> *Praise*: What is good about the writing? What should not be changed? Why is it good?
> *Question*: As a reader, what do you not understand?
> *Polish*: What specific suggestions for improvement can you make?

In my classroom, I changed the *Q* to a *P* for ponder, but the purpose was the same. After modeling what a peer response group session could look like (see Preface), students were then given guidelines for peer response groups (see Appendix) to use as reference. Rather than comment using a form during their sessions, I simply gave students larger-sized post-it notes on which to write their *PPP* feedback. Afterwards, students could give the post-it notes to the student writer who could then easily stick the notes directly onto the draft.

2 | How does peer response fit within the writing workshop model?

According to Kittle, the writing workshop consists of several building blocks that work together to improve student writing. In an e-mail exchange I had with Kittle over the summer, she identified these building blocks and their importance: "I think of writers' workshop as a handful of building blocks: reading, notebook work (QW & revision), mini-lessons (in text study, teacher's process, grammar, etc.), time for conferring with kids about writing, and sharing. These are the things writers need, so finding time for them is our goal." Kittle went on to say that "Conferring is our most powerful teaching time. Everyone learns best 1:1 based on the context of their own writing piece, so we have to work it into practice."

Similarly, Gallagher has argued that student writers need not only to write for authentic audiences (as their peers become that audience in their peer response groups), but that students also "need meaningful feedback from both the teacher and their peers." As the teacher, I am only one person. I can provide feedback, yes, but it is limited by my time and attention, which must be divided among the 130 students I have each year. On the other hand, peer response groups offer students the opportunity to have get feedback from the peers. This feedback can be powerful in driving student writing forward as students attempt to help each other make meaning.

3 | What does the research say about peer response groups? Can students become effective respondents?

As Neubert and McNelis point out, "many teachers grieved over the use of peer response groups because they had difficulty getting students to respond effectively to one another's writing. Vague comments . . . proliferate. The students, too, complained that their peers rarely offered substantial help with their writing" (52). Similarly, my own colleagues expressed the concern that peer response groups were akin to "the blind leading the blind" (Interview, Question 3). However, Neubert and McNelis took on this challenge and conducted a study in which they explicitly taught students how to respond more effectively to each other's writing.

In their study, Neubert and McNelis recorded students' PQP responses and then classified their comments into three categories: 1) vague, 2) general but useful, and 3) specific. The authors found that only 23% of students' comments were "specific" comments, while 53% were "general but useful." The remaining comments—1 in 5—were considered vague. Neubert and McNelis then conducted whole class, explicit instruction on the comments themselves. They gave students sample comments and asked the indicate on its specificity and effectiveness. Neubert and McNelis found that when they explicitly showed students which comments were specific and useful, students comments improved in the next round of peer response. After several class exercises pointing out the differences among specific, general but useful, and vague comments, students' specific comments rose from 23% to 42% while general but useful comments dropped to 44% and vague comments dropped to 14%.

I took a cue from Neubert and McNelis' study and replicated their process in my own classroom. After our initial response group session, I asked students to record their comments on each others' writing. Students submitted their comments to me online via a Google Docs Form, which streamlined the process (go here to see the form: http://tinyurl.com/746xczp). After reviewing their comments, I chose a handful that I felt were typical of the comments they gave one another (see Double Entry Journal 3 and 4). I then took those comments and recopied them onto handout for students to review in class (see Appendix B). I asked students to classify the comments into the same three categories that Neubert and McNelis used in their study. We then had a brief discussion explaining why some comments would be considered specific, general but useful, or vague. This then turned into a discussion about why more specific comments were ultimately the most useful. Students took notes and were encouraged to take what we discussed with them into the next response group session.

Sure enough, after they had received some explicit instruction on what defined an effective comment, students' comments during the second peer response group improved. Specific comments rose from 25% in the initial peer response session to nearly 50% after the second session. General but useful comments dropped from 45% to over 40%, while vague comments dropped significantly from 30% to around 10%.

As DiPardo and Freedman point out, "practitioners are deeply divided as to the efficacy of the small-group approach" (120). Although they made this observation on teacher attitudes more than twenty years go, it still rings true as I, myself, has observed and witness among my own colleagues. Yet as Neubert and McNelis' study and my own bear out, students can be taught to become more effective respondents to each other's writing.

More important than these quantitative measures, however, was the student self-reported data in which students described the specific effects that the peer response group feedback had on their writing (see Findings).

4 | How can peer response be measured or evaluated?

Authentic peer response is tricky. After all, if it is happening in its most authentic, organic form, then most—if not all—of the important work is going on within the students' conversations and inside the writer's head when he/she is listening and revising. That said, however, there are opportunities for collecting information or data that can indicate how students are doing with the process of peer response. For example, students can be asked to complete a written reflection after a peer response session (Appendix C) and then again with their final draft (Appendix D).

Teachers can also collect student comments to each other during the process as a way to monitor the types of feedback they are providing (see FAQ 3).

Below is a sampling of the types of information that can be used to help evaluate student peer response:

Student Reported

- Response Group Reflection (completed after each response group session; students report what feedback they got from the response group and what changes they may/may not make from this point on)
- Student Post-it Feedback (completed during response groups; students provide *praise, ponder, polish* feedback to one another)
- Essay Reflection (completed after the final draft of an essay is turned in; students report what changes were made as a result of their response group)
- Annotated essay (students choose one of their essays and point out what choices/changes they made in their essays)

Teacher Reported

- Written observations during peer response groups ("writing amidst")
- Evaluation of student writing
- Notebook entries/reflections

Ultimately, the effectiveness of peer response groups can be best seen in the writing produced by students.

5 | How can peer response groups work as formative assessment for students and teachers?

In *Transformative Assessment in Action*, James Popham defines formative assessment as "a planned process in which assessment elicited evidence of students' status is used by teachers to adjust their ongoing instructional procedures or by students to adjust their current learning tactics" (6).

According to Popham's definition, formative assessment not only applies to the changes that the teacher might make to instructional activities based on the feedback he/she is getting about student performance, but also applies to the learning adjustments that students make. Peer response groups fit both these criteria.

As the teacher, I was able to make instructional adjustments based on what I observed about how students were working in their groups, the feedback they received, and the quality of their writing. For example, because I was able to collect and analyze the comments students were giving to each other in their peer response groups, I was able to see whether or not the feedback they were giving each other was effective. Seeing that more than half of their initial response group comments were either vague or general, I spent some time in class explicitly teaching students the qualities of specific feedback. Through student reflections, I was also able to see if there were any issues with how students interpreted or reacted to the feedback they received. Student reflections and comments during peer response groups also allow me to get a sense of what students believe constitute effective writing. Such observations can then drive future instruction and discussion about writing.

For students, peer response groups give them the opportunity to get feedback on their writing *during the process*. This is the key requirement of formative assessment: that it is given during the process so that adjustments can still be made before the final product (the summative assessment) is evaluated. Moreover, because students know that their peers will be reading and responding to their writing, they are quite likely writing with their peer audience in mind. In other words, even before they meet in their peer response groups, students are already making learning (writing) adjustments.

Additionally, not only does writing improve during the peer response group process, but the peer response itself is also affected. By explicitly discussing and teaching the qualities of effective response, students go into their next peer response group sessions better able to provide specific and helpful feedback to their peers.

6 | How do peer response groups affect student attitudes on writing?

No doubt that peer response groups can be a scary process, not only for teachers, but particularly for students. Students, I believe, understand that when they turn an essay into a teacher that the "mom rule" applies. Just as their moms would love them no matter what, similarly, teachers would also "love" their students, no matter how poor their writing may be. However, students know that this principle doesn't apply to their peers. Sharing their work with their peers, for many students, could potentially invite laughter or ridicule. It's because of this possibility that response groups should be carefully modeled and monitored to ensure students' privacy and comfort.

However, despite these challenges, when done right, peer response can have an equally positive impact on students' attitudes toward writing and the writing process. Note the following response from students after a peer response group session:

> "I was pleasantly surprised by the positive response of the group. I was worried going in because this essay is so much more personal than my last. I also used new techniques I wasn't sure were effective. Fortunately, my group agrees that they are, which is a huge relief and motivator." - Alyssa

Here, Alyssa reveals the fear that she had about sharing a personal essay. Yet when her group provided her with some positive feedback, she felt not only relieved, but also motivated. I know from my own experience writing that motivation is sometimes the hardest part. By giving students an authentic audience for their writing, peer response groups can provide the necessary motivation students need.

Here's another student's comments:

> "I was a bit surprised when Katy told me that my view about art that I stated in the conclusion should be in the beginning because I hadn't thought about that. I think it would help bring my essay full circle." - Allie

Because Allie was able to see her essay in a new light based on the comments of her peers, not only was she able to improve her essay, she also walked away from her group more confident in the process of peer response. Students learn to trust the writing process and learn to use multiple readers as a way to find their way through their writing.

Furthermore, peer response allows students to see that the personal feedback made possible through peer response can be an integral part of their writing, even beyond the classroom and into their college and adult lives. In *Clearing the Way*, Tom Romano discusses the need for student-to-student dialogue. "This personal student-to-student dialog," Romano argues, "is important. Students need to find out whom among their peers they can comfortably and profitably get help from. Adult writers do the same" (72).

7 | What are the limitations or challenges of peer response groups?

Peer response groups can have its limitations. As I noted in my reflection on my teacher-student conference with Katy (see Double Entry Notebook), because teachers are more skilled at looking at student writing and providing feedback, peer response can only go so far. Most students are simply not skilled enough to respond to each other's writing in the same way as teachers. Peer response can be limited by students' ability, as many of my colleagues also note (see Interviews, Questions 3 and 5).

Therefore, if this is one of the limitations, then the challenge would be how to get students to the point where they can be more effective respondents to each other's work. Strategies, including explicit modeling and teaching of peer response skills, are necessary to make response groups work. However, this poses yet another challenge—time. On one hand, peer response response groups can help save time for teachers in that the burden of feedback is now shared by all. But on the other hand, more time is needed to teach peer response skills, especially at the beginning of the response process.

As many of my colleagues also noted in their interviews, another challenge is one of trust. Do we trust students to be able to work together independently to improve each other's writing? Or will they spend the time given to them to socialize? How seriously will they take the process? Again, while these are valid concerns, by modeling and setting expectations clearly from the beginning of the process, students can be taught not only how to respond effectively to one another, but also learn to trust in peer response part of the natural process of writing.

Finally, another challenge in using peer response group may be that once they are in place, they risk becoming stale. If students stay in the same group of peer respondents, they can be limited to the same types of feedback. Sometimes a fresh set of eyes is necessary to see writing well, and therefore, peer response groups would need to be changed. This could mean changing the process of feedback slightly, or it could mean changing the groups themselves. The challenge here, of course, is that with new respondents, students will need time to get comfortable with each other, and to some extent, the process starts over again. In my class, I changed peer response groups after two essays, so approximately once per marking period.

8 | Overall what are the benefits of peer response?

There are several benefits to peer response. In "Creating Peer Response Workshops," University of Minnesota professor Pamela Flash summarizes the following benefits:

Through peer response groups, students receive

- *Opportunities to improve drafts before it's too late.* Again, this formative assessment is crucial to helping students write before the summative assessment is submitted. Too often I have myself in a situation in which I'm reading a student's final paper only to realize that had someone read this essay earlier in the process, several key adjustments could have been made. Peer response groups increase the possibility that drafts can be improved and mistakes can be corrected.

- *An expanded idea of audience*. Writing for the teacher is one thing, and as I mention earlier, the "mom" rule applies to teachers. But when their peers are part of their audience, the dynamics of writing changes and students become much more invested in their writing.

- *Practice in reading for revision*. When students provide feedback to each other in their response groups, the writer is not the only one who benefits. The simple—and complicated—act of listening to someone else's writing and giving effective feedback develops students' "ears" for writing. They walk away from each session with a better understanding of writing, which they now bring to their own writing process.

- *Enhanced communication skills*. Learning to talk to each other about writing—and in general—is a key skill that students will need not only for school, for college, or for work, but also for life. Too often, disagreement and misunderstanding results from poor communication skills, especially when it comes to listening. Students can not be given enough opportunities to practice listening and speaking to one another—especially in listening *first* and then speaking (as they are required to do in peer response groups).

- *Increased confidence*. Students often lack confidence when it comes to their writing ability. Oftentimes, they assume that everyone else writes *better* than they do. However, as Flash points out, "When [students] see their peers' first drafts and realize that drafts don't have to be perfect and that those written by their peers are pretty similar to their own, they see that it is safe to loosen up and take risks in developing ideas."

FINDINGS: LOOKING BACK

Looking back on the peer response process, I felt generally very happy with the results. Overall, I believe my students had—and will continue to have—a positive experience with peer response. Below are a few key findings from this inquiry:

- *Peer response can improve student writing*. As I reviewed the drafts and final revisions of my students essays, I found that the revisions were almost always better than the drafts. Of course, the amount of revision among student papers varied. A handful of students' final essays were nearly identical to their original drafts, but in most cases, the final essays underwent some substantial revision. When students were asked to discuss these changes, their comments included the following:

  "My final copy has been stripped down to the things that are most essential in driving the story." - Sam

  "I heeded my group's advice by connecting my paragraph about puppy mills to my main point. I added the line: 'It's not [the dogs'] fault. They have come from difficult situations' in the prior paragraph." - Allie

  "It's much more organized. I realized after my talking to my group that my first draft was a little all over the place. I moved the anecdote about my coach to before describing what triggers my guilt." - Brian

  "My response group pointed out that certain word like 'awesome' and the introductory paragraph needed to be moved. This final revision mainly smooths the writing, making sure it flows continuously." - Jesse

  "In the early draft, I compared the three different types of mental illnesses—accessories, accomplices, and abductors—using examples of ADHD and Alzheimer's. Reading through it, and receiving comments from Jesse, I decided the three parts lacked organization and flow—so I trashed it. Mainly, I expanded the bipolar section and added another anecdote." - Brenna

  "My group pointed out that I needed to strengthen the connection between sympathy cards and my brother's piano so the message would be clearer. I was also more direct with my view on sympathy cards and less contradictory so there wouldn't be any confusion." - Katherine

  "The previous draft was more stream-of-consciousness, disjointed and missing a purpose. It went right into an example without stating what it was meant to convey. Also, the middle of the essay talked more about 'the evidence' and 'musicians' than drummers, which confused my response group. The final draft is more organized with a foreshadowing thesis sentence." - Stephen

  Based on their own reflections on their process, as well as their final products, it was clear that having the opportunity to share their writing with their peers and get their feedback was a valuable experience for these students. Even in cases where students didn't necessarily take the advice of their response group, by reading aloud their work, students were able to "hear" their writing in a way that they might not have otherwise.

- *Students have had insufficient experience with peer response, which has led them to misunderstand the type of feedback needed to improve their own—and others'—writing*. The information from the interviews from teachers was telling. On one hand, most teachers agreed that peer response had at least some positive effect on student writing. Yet, at the same time, all teachers expressed serious concerns about the challenges of peer response groups, citing the lack of students' abilities as the main culprit for their ineffectiveness. Most teachers cited that they used peer response both for revision and editing, and they also believed that they used peer response groups "enough."

Based on my own inquiry into and implementation of peer response groups, I found my colleagues' comments interesting. I wondered what teachers' responses reflected about their attitudes towards students and the writing process. What assumptions were guiding their decisions about how to implement peer response groups and how often? For example, teachers commented that when they used response groups, they often did so with peer editing sheets and other structured materials. While these tools are important to give students some direction—especially for younger students—I wondered what these tools revealed about what teachers believed about their students and their abilities? The more teachers tell students what to do, in other words, the less it seems that they trust students to be able to do themselves. And if that is true, then whose fault is that? Giving students a peer editing sheet, while useful and practical, is not the same as teaching students how to *actually* respond to each other and more importantly, how to *talk to each other* about writing. DiPardo and Freedman acknowledge that "a common means of preserving some teacher-centered control is the use of such procedural heuristics as lists of questions and reminders ("editing sheets") to channel response." However, the authors also point out that while this does give teachers some degree of control, "as much can be lost as gained by such strategies." In the end, "the real issue," they argue, "is how to devise ways in which teachers and students might productively share power."

This lack of experience in talking about writing was made clear to me after my colleagues and I modeled a peer response group session for the class (see Double Entry Notebook). When Orla asked if "that's how English teachers really talk to each other," she was genuinely surprised at how serious and enthusiastic we were to talk about writing. She and her classmates—who were equally taken aback—had rarely, if ever, seen such conversation. As anyone who has walked through the school cafeteria can tell you, students are more than capable of having animated conversations about their plans for the weekend, the latest movie they saw, or the clothes that they wear. But rarely—if ever—do they have such animated conversations about *their own writing* (or any writing really). How can we expect our students to talk enthusiastically and seriously about their own and other's writing if they've never had it modeled for them? Yes, they may engage in such discussion while discussing a book, but they tend to see discussion about a book they've read as being different from discussion about an essay they've written. As I mention before, students can be shown that the discussions they have about what they read is really no different from the discussions they can have when they write. Teachers can make this connection clear.

In my view, I don't think I use response groups enough. In order to be effective, students need consistent practice working together. I'm constantly pressed for time, and in the past, the opportunities for peer response during drafting have been largely neglected. So when my colleagues say that they are using peer response "enough," I wonder what they mean by that. Is it enough because they may have a more narrow view of what peer response groups are? Or is it just "enough" because that's enough *control* that teachers are willing to turn over to students? If we don't trust our students, and we're afraid they'll simply use the time to socialize, then limiting the amount of time they have to meet—and at the same time, the potential time they need to discuss their writing—is an understandable solution.

- *Peer response is a skill.* Ultimately, I found that peer response is a skill just as reading and writing. And just as reading and writing are skills that can be taught, peer response is also a skill that has to be explicitly taught and integrated into our teaching. When we teach reading, we may model effective reading habits by thinking-aloud and annotating texts in front of students. When we teach writing, we provide students with samples and discuss what makes them well-written (or not). But when we ask students to respond to each other in conversation about their writing, what do we do beyond giving them a checklist of "corrections" to make? Fishbowl discussion is often cited as an effective strategy for showing students how to discuss a book they've read, but why not use that same strategy to show students how to discuss their writing? As Hall points out, "telling students how to respond—even modeling for them—is not teaching. Learning to respond requires that students discover for themselves the discourse features of productive response, and then practice them."

  I also found that in their comments to one another that students had a harder time giving specific *praise* comments to each other. In other words, while students were better able to give specific *polish and*

ponder feedback, they were not as able to cite what worked in their peers' writing. I was curious about this, but then I realized that perhaps students haven't seen specific praise feedback in their own writing, and so they don't know how to identify it in other students' writing. This made me think about the type of feedback I've provided to students on their writing over the years, and as I look at the generic comments that students gave each other, I couldn't help see myself as a teacher giving those same generic comments. If I expect my students to be able to give each other specific feedback, then I need to model that for them as well.

- *Students* can *be taught to be effective peer respondents*. One of the biggest challenges that teachers cited in using peer response groups was the belief that students could not effectively comment on each other's work. Again, as one teacher commented, peer response was often "the blind leading the blind." I found, however, that students *could* be taught how to respond more effectively to one another. Rather than expect students to be simply "know" what say to one another when they are in response groups, teachers need to explicitly teach students the differences between effective (specific) and ineffective (vague) feedback. Bean points out that some general principles must be in place for students to work effectively in peer response groups. Teachers, he contends, must "train students to engage each other at the level of ideas." Furthermore, students must learn "to back up comments with specific examples from the draft" and teachers must "stress the importance of precision when giving advice." When I showed my students samples of their comments to one another, we were able to determine what the comments revealed about the writing they were examining. For example, students could see that more the more effective comments were ones that pointed to specific issues of focus or reasoning. Feedback that addressed the "big issues"—the conceptual, idea-centered aspects of their writing—were more important in peer response than issues of grammar and mechanics.

  Peer response isn't really about getting students to "correct" each other's work. In fact, in terms of grammar and mechanics, yes, my colleagues are probably right in that there are cases when it is, in fact, "the blind leading the blind." Students may not know the technical aspects of where to put a comma, but that is a separate issue. Student can, however, respond to each other's work as *readers*. They do this all the time, after all, whenever they read a novel, short story, or poem. Students can be shown that effective peer response is about bringing those reading skills to the writing process.

… AND LOOKING AHEAD

One option in looking ahead would be not just to attach the comments to the individual piece of writing and track how the response changes the writer/writing, but to also track the students' response abilities on an individual basis. In this inquiry, I looked mostly at how the writing improved as a result of peer response. Next time, I could focus on how specific students' skills in peer response also improved. Some students were better respondents than others; next time, I need to find a way to better identify those students. I could also have the more effective student respondents model a response group for the class during a "refresher" lesson.

I'd like to further examine how peer response groups work in other teachers' classrooms. Rather than just data from teachers, it would be fascinating to witness their peer response groups in action. I'd also like to explore more on how teacher assumptions and power dynamics affect instruction when it comes to peer response groups.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: the Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996. Print.

Brookhart, Susan M. *How to Give Effective Feedback to Your Students*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008. Print.

DiPardo, Anne and Sarah Warshauer Freedman. "Peer response groups in the writing classroom: theoretic foundations and new directions." *Review of Educational Research,* Vol. 58, No. 2. (Summer, 1988), pp. 119-149. Print.

Flash, Pamela. "Creating Effective Peer Response Workshops." Center for Writing. University of Minnesota. Web.

Gallagher, Kelly. *Teaching Adolescent Writers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2006. Print.

Hall, Mark. "The Politics of Peer Response." *The Writing Instructor*. 2009. Web.

Kittle, Penny, *Write Beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. Print.

Neubert, Gloria A. and Sally J. McNelis. "Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Strategies." *English Journal*, Vol. 79, No. 5. (September 1990), pp. 52-56. Print.

Popham, W. James. *Transformative Assessment in Action: An Inside Look at Applying the Process*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2011. Print.

Romano, Tom. *Clearing the Way: Working with Teenage Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987. Print.

APPENDIX A

Writing Workshop: Guidelines for response groups

When your work is under discussion:

- Ask for the specific feedback you would like (either at the beginning or end).
- Make notes on your copy as people talk—even if you don't immediately agree with what they have to say.
- Tell us what stage of the writing process you are in, but without saying how bad, trivial or unworthy your work is.
- Don't explain why you wrote it; this should become evident.
- Remain silent and listen as people respond to your work. Try to really hear what they are saying without defending your piece or trying to explain.

When responding to someone else's work:

- Try to see the potential of each piece. Try to build on what is working rather than pointing out what isn't—this is much more useful for the writer, and more difficult to do.
- Express your response in terms of the piece's effect on you, the reader; avoid sweeping judgments and generalizations.
- Articulate your response as clearly as you can. It is not enough to simply feel something. Good response depends on conscious, articulate responses.
- Tell the writer what you remember most clearly.
- Tell the writer where you lost attention or were confused. For this part, use “I statements”. For example, “I didn’t understand how your conclusion ties into your thesis.” Or, “I wonder if another example paragraph would drive your central point home so that there’s no doubt that the reader would get it.”
- Tell the writer what you liked, what moved you, what you can still see or feel-- be as specific as you can.
- Be respectful of the writer. Do not criticize in a belittling way.
- Keep the focus on the piece you are discussing. Avoid telling stories of your own experience. This is not about you.
- Refer to the "I" character as "the speaker" or "the narrator" rather than "you". Even though this may be personal writing, the writer has, in effect, presented him or herself as a character in the piece and should be referred to in this way. Also, we are here to discuss the writing and not the writer.
- Allow the writer to retain ownership. Do not try to make major changes or rewrite the piece for the author. Your job is not to impose your own view, but to help the writer convey his or her view more powerfully.

Adapted from Guidelines for Response Groups by Dr. Meg Petersen.

Procedure

1. Each person takes a turn reading his/her essay aloud to the group. Feel free to give some background information where absolutely necessary. Depending on what stage of revision this is, the writer may want to ask the group to listen with a particular issue or question in mind. The writer can state this at the beginning, before reading, or ask the group later (see #3).

2. As the person reads, each person in the group writes down three things (post-it notes):

    a. Praise: What did you like about the piece? As you listen to the essay, write down things that stand out to you in a positive way.
    b. Ponder: What did this essay make you think about? What questions emerged for you as you listened? What questions do you still have?
    c. Polish: What concrete suggestions or advice can you give that may help the writer as he/she revises?

3. The writer now takes the opportunity to ask the group any questions he/she has about the piece and to solicit specific advice.

4. Everyone says ‘thank you’ - the writer to his/her response group for listening, and the response group to the writer for sharing. Students should give the post-it notes to the writer.

5. Repeat 1-4 until everyone in the group is finished.

APPENDIX B

Response Group Feedback

Below are several responses from your peers. Next to each comment, indicate whether it is *vague, general but useful, or specific.*

	Vague	*General, but useful*	*Specific*
Examples of Praise			
"Good diction and syntax"			
"Good examples, quotes"			
"Good connection to being clumsy"			
"Love the childlike language and hyperbole"			
"Liked the line, 'harsh land like Minnesota'"			
"Great conclusion"			
"I liked how you use the bike wheel to describe frustration"			
"Use of dialogue added significance to the story"			
"Liked the sarcasm"			
"Good repetition for emphasis"			
"'Just walk away' in paragraph 3 was funny"			
"Liked 'fragile smile' line"			
"Good pathos"			
"Good description of cooties as an epidemic"			
Examples of Ponder/Polish			
"Is your essay about dancing or your friend?"			
"What is the true purpose of your essay?"			
"How does describing grade school connect to your points?"			
"Wonder if more personal examples would make the essay better?"			
"What does it mean to be a fan?"			
"Try to stick to one theme and channel your anger there."			
"Limit yourself to a few concise sentences in the first paragraph."			
"Add more action."			
"Give more background."			
"Look at little closer at the transition from narrative to analysis."			
"Wrap the story up."			
"Description and details needed."			
"Add variation to syntax."			
"Sounds [like you're] complaining. Make it more logical. People will respect you."			
"Back up statements like 'people expect' with concrete examples."			
"What made you want to write about this?"			
"Add more rhetorical devices."			
"Delete some repetition of ideas."			

Complete: Effective response group feedback is…

APPENDIX C

Response Group: Reflection

Writer _____

Response Group _____

Date of feedback/response:

Writing that was discussed (for example, “personal essay 1” or “editorial”; if you have a working title, please include):

Approximate # of words/pages of this piece of writing:

Stage in drafting/revision (for example, “some notebook work, then first draft” or “second major revision”):

What questions/concerns about this piece of writing did you have going before your response group?

Summarize the response and feedback from your response group:

Praise (What did they **t**ell you they liked or stood out to them?)

Polish (What questions did they **a**sk?)

Ponder (What advice did they **g**ive?)

turn over —>

What surprised you in the response/feedback you received?

What questions/concerns/struggles do you still have about this piece of writing?

Please reflect on your next steps—how you feel about the direction of your piece and what *specific* areas of this piece of writing you'll address in the next draft/revision.

Your favorite phrase, sentence, section from this piece of writing so far? (copy below)

Keep Calm and Write On.
(and pat yourself on the back for making it this far)

APPENDIX D

Reflection: Final Revision

Name _____

AP Lang & Comp (Ebarvia)

1. Apply SOAPSTone to this piece:

   - What roles or personas did you use as the **speaker** of this piece? For example, did you write as a daughter, brother, student, etc.? Try to *characterize* yourself as speaker.

   - What was the **occasion** or *context* of this piece. Where did the idea for this come from? What made you want to write about this topic?

   - Who is the primary **audience** for this piece? Who are any secondary **audiences**? (If applicable, is there anyone who you feel is definitely *not* the intended audience for this piece?)

   - Describe your **purpose** in writing this piece. What is the lasting impression you want your reader to have?

   - List and/or describe the **subject(s)** of this piece of writing. In addition to the primary subject, what other subjects does this writing explore. Explain your subject(s) in a phrase that includes an essential *conflict or tension* in the piece. For example, in Quindlen's commencement speech, her subject is not just "being perfect" but rather "what being perfect means for young, educated women who have to wrestle with the expectations of the world and their own unique identities."

   - What adjectives would you use to describe your **tone** in this piece? If you can, try using an "AP-style" description with two adjectives, such as "authoritative and pragmatic" or "confident yet reserved."

2. How is this final revision different from the previous draft you workshopped in your response group? Give examples to illustrate your revision process.

3. If you had another opportunity to revise, what would you do?