Introducing Students to Peer Review of Writing

Richard M. Chisholm

Note: The Introduction below describes a classroom exercise to teach collaborative peer review of writing. The draft paper that follows the Introduction describes the theory and practice of collaborative peer review.

Introduction

"Right away I was drawn into your paper," a student wrote about a colleague's draft, "because the scenario is so common that I could personally relate to it." Responding with these words of praise to a request for feedback on a draft paper, this student had taken the first step in learning to participate effectively in collaborative peer review.

Peer response to a colleague's paper has become commonplace in writing classes. But the draft and this student's response to it were unusual because she was responding not to another student's writing but to a paper I had written and asked the class to read. Not only that; the paper itself describes the procedures for conducting collaborative peer review. In receiving instruction about how to read and comment on a paper, reading my paper, and commenting on it, students in this class were learning to participate productively in collaborative peer review.

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An Initial Training Exercise

For several years, I have used an exercise that demonstrates procedures for collaborative peer review of writing in a college class. I use this exercise during the first week of writing courses to introduce students to what peer review entails and to open students' minds to issues we develop later in the semester. It describes how writers can collaborate productively and then gives students guided practice in doing it. References to the paper throughout the semester—both by students and by me—show that this exercise provides a firm basis for building further understanding of collaborative work in the classroom and beyond.

The Procedure for This Exercise

For this exercise, I usually follow a procedure like the following, which is based on suggestions by Karen Spear and Peter Elbow. After a brief preliminary explanation, I hand out the paper and have students read it. They respond in writing to four kinds of questions about the paper. Then each student responds orally to it. Toward the end of the hour, after general discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, I ask students to write down their concerns about collaborative review. This freewrite often brings to the surface students' anxieties about group work and points to the problems we will need to cope with throughout the semester.

The Goals of This Exercise

These are unusual characteristics for a classroom exercise. How often does instruction engage students in the collaborative review of a paper that is itself about the process of collaborative peer review? How often do students review a paper written by their instructor? These features help students meet several goals: 1) this exercise helps students grasp the concept of collaborative peer review; 2) it helps them understand appropriate procedures; 3) it confronts them with realistic

problems in a supportive environment—with built-in risks and safety nets; 4) it gives practice in participating in an actual document review; and 5) it prepares them for engaging in collaborative peer review beyond the classroom and beyond the campus. While this exercise takes up only parts of two class periods, it lays a foundation for semester-long study and practice of this important technique.

How This Exercise Reaches These Goals

This exercise reaches these goals in several ways:

1) *This Exercise Presents the Concept of Collaborative Peer Review.* The draft paper that students read and comment on during this exercise shows real-life peers learning to review each other's writing. This feature helps students who know little or nothing about document review comprehend how useful collaborative peer review can be.

2) *This Exercise Describes Realistic Practices of Collaborative Peer Review.* This exercise gives practical step-by-step procedures for conducting collaborative peer review in a college class. Although the paper describes writers on the job, students have no trouble seeing how the procedures could work for them. In fact, the business office setting provides enough distance from their present academic setting so that students can examine the components of collaborative peer review objectively. While the paper contains simulated material and while its characters are fictitious, students recognize its realism and truth.

3) *This Exercise Confronts Students With Realities.* The exercise is also realistic in the way it puts students at risk. I expect them to read a real draft and to review

a real writer. Because that writer is their professor, the risk is not simulated. I also provide safety by explaining the importance of peer review, describing the procedures, providing a supportive context, and creating a framework for them to work in. I specifically ask for their comments and accept them with enthusiasm that is manifestly genuine because I genuinely need the help. When I hand out the paper, I explain that many other students have read and commented on it—and survived. By asking for their help and accepting whatever help they give, I have created trust. And by actually using the feedback in subsequent revisions, I make good on the trust.

4) *This Exercise Provides Practice in Conducting a Peer Review.* As soon as the students learn about the skills of collaborative peer review, they practice them by actually reviewing a paper. As they comment about the writing of the instructor, students gain insight into the review process, especially important elements such as the need for useful but tactful comment and the need for a writer to elicit comment. They also develop skill in doing these things.

5) *This Exercise Refers to Writing Beyond the Classroom.* Students learn that this kind of review lies at the heart of the process of collaborative and cooperative writing anywhere it takes place—inside the classroom as well as outside.

Additional Benefits of This Exercise

This exercise initiates students early in the semester into the mysteries of collaborative peer review. It not only explains the value of doing it and shows them how to do it, but it shows them that they can do it.

Meeting those goals at the beginning of the semester gives students a good start at mastering important attitudes and skills.

Having students comment about my paper leaves me in control of the class. I can direct the discussion, pause to emphasize important points, fill in where student comment leaves blanks, and help students overcome their natural reticence to comment on another person's writing. Students are not thrown prematurely into groups that require them to interact with fellow students. Later in the semester, as they become more and more confident working in groups of their peers, they can refer to this initial successful experience carried on under the watchful eye of the instructor.

Responses to This Exercise

Over the past several years, I have used this exercise with considerable success in a variety of groups. Students in several sections of Composition, Introduction to Communication, Technical Writing, and Study of Language, as well as writers in several professional groups, have read and critiqued my paper. In each case, the procedures and text have elicited significant comments that indicated the participants had grasped the concepts and were able to apply them skillfully, even after such scant exposure and practice.

Not the least advantage of this exercise is that students find it interesting. The fact that they can openly critique the prof provides a good deal of motivation. Classes are lively. Readers participate with an enthusiasm that I judge springs from interest in this concept of working together on a draft. One reader of the paper said, for example, "It makes me want to go right out and do it."

In short, this highly compressed and economical exercise effectively launches a semester-long study of collaborative peer review.

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Note: Following is the paper I use in this exercise.

HOW TO CONDUCT COLLABORATIVE PEER REVIEW OF WRITING

Giving and Getting Feedback on Important Documents

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PART I: THE NEED FOR COLLABORATIVE PEER REVIEW OF WRITING

Why Efforts at Eliciting Feedback Often Fail. When writers ask their colleagues for feedback on a piece of writing, they often get perfunctory responses because they go about it awkwardly. The following scenario illustrates a failed effort at eliciting feedback:

"Jane, will you look over this report for me?"

"Sure, Bill, I'd be happy to."

After reading over the report, Jane hands it back, pointing to her proofreading marks that show that she has read Bill's report. She adds a cursory comment of perfunctory praise:

"Good idea, Bill! I think the boss will like this!"

Bill's draft needs a thorough revision, so what he needs is analysis and suggestions that will help him reconceptualize it. That is what he is really asking for, but he is not likely to get it the way he asked for it.

Why is Jane's attempt at giving peer feedback unsuccessful? Why does Bill's request fail to call forth the full response he needs?

Several reasons account for the failure. First, Bill does not know how to dig out the information he needs; in his lame effort at eliciting feedback he has not formulated the right questions. On her part, Jane does not know how to respond. Besides, she is reticent because she knows Bill has worked hard on this report and she does not want to offend him.

Lying beneath these shortcomings is a deeper one, rooted in an inadequate concept of the writing and revising process. Experienced writers and experienced reviewers know that a solo draft is *only* a draft and that the purpose of peer review is to stimulate the writer to rethink the entire document. Although systematic rethinking is what Bill needs, they both assume that the job is virtually complete. If this is really an important piece of writing and Bill is the only one who has seen it, it *cannot* be complete, but neither he nor Jane seems to understand that fact. Bill is too close to it, Jane too distant. While Bill may have a vague hunch that something is lacking, he doesn't realize that he should still be rethinking the report.

Jane's failure to help Bill reconceptualize his report, then, stems from the fact that these colleagues have not developed systematic strategies and techniques for peer review of their writing. And because neither has been instructed in fruitful ways to review each other's work, neither knows how to go about it skillfully. We can be sure, in addition, that neither of the partners is prepared for the intensive labor that peer review and revision entail.

Bill and Jane are missing out on a lot. Getting together to write in a supportive context creates a magic that could make their writing better and their experience with it more satisfying.

PART II: PROCEDURES FOR PEER REVIEW OF WRITING

How Bill Could Have Elicited Useful Feedback from His Colleagues. Bill's effort at eliciting feedback might have been more successful if he

had used a procedure such as this: Call together a few colleagues, including Jane, for a session to review his report. Explain that he has written a document, that it is important, and that he wants help on it. Then give out copies of his report and ask his readers to jot down their responses to it. Finally, ask individuals to give their responses aloud and the group to discuss them.

Four Kinds of Useful Feedback. During the discussion, Bill's colleagues can help him by giving four kinds of feedback. (This scheme is adapted from Karen Spear's *Sharing Writing* and Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power.*)

1. *Identify Values in the Paper.* Give positive feedback on your colleague's paper. What did you like about it? What are the best parts? What are the strongest points? Where did you become more interested? What ideas did you find exciting? What words struck you forcibly or resonated for you? What things surprised you? (Praising qualities in the paper is not so much a matter of flattering the writer or of stroking the writer's ego but of identifying shared values.)

2. *Describe the Paper.* Explain the main ideas of the paper and how it is organized. How are the lead, the body, and the end related? What did you hear as the main points of your colleague's paper? After reading the first page, where did you expect the paper to go? At that point, were you with the writer or against him? How did the paper guide your thinking? How did your knowledge and feelings change as you read? State some related topics that the paper did not include.

3. *Ask Questions About the Paper.* Ask questions about your colleague's meaning and wording. Be explicit about what you see to be problems. What ques-

tions came to mind as you read it or your colleague read it aloud? Ask about parts that need more explanation or that are not clear to you. Ask "What did you mean when you said...?" and "Why did you say...?" Ask for clarification, further information, and elaboration on points you found particularly interesting.

4. *Suggest Points to Revise.* Give suggestions for improving the paper. Suggest places that need more information, more clarity, or re-thinking. Tell what you wish the paper had said or what it might have said.

Two Forms of Response: Written and Spoken. In this review session, Bill's peers give him both verbal and written feedback. Writing it down allows the reader time to reflect on the paper and create an appropriate response to it. Getting written responses allows the writer to refer to them after the review session. But verbal response, with its flexibility and give and take, will more likely stimulate ideas. In addition, comments that may seem harsh or cold in writing may be made personal and warm when spoken.

Bill's Role in Collaborative Peer Review: How a Writer Interacts With Colleagues During a Review Session. As the writer asking colleagues to review his piece of writing, Bill interacts with them in constructive ways. Knowing that their time and effort are valuable, he calls on their help only for important pieces of writing. When he needs their help, he does not hesitate to ask for it, but he is careful not to present them with a pile of scribbled notes and expect them to sort it and make sense of it. Before they meet, he sends each reviewer a copy of the document, making clear why it is important to him and asking for help on specific aspects of it. As he receives feedback during the review session, he is careful to refrain from defending what he has written and from showing or giving offense, but he tries to stimulate his colleagues to make deeper responses by probing and by asking for examples or clarification. He constantly gives feedback on their feedback. Most importantly, all the

time that they are talking, he is busy reconceptualizing his piece of writing.

Bill's Task After the Review Session: What a Writer Does With Feedback. The period immediately following a peer review session is often the critical time in the development of a piece of writing. The writer sits alone with the document to mull his recollection of his peer's responses. He sorts their comments to discover what is usable and what is not. He weighs them and sifts them. If the review has been successful, the writer will be able to reconceptualize the piece of writing and can follow up with extensive rethinking, rewriting, and revising. What may have been only a passable solo effort has been transformed under the stimulus of peer review into a richer and more powerful piece of writing.

In a system of collaborative peer review of documents such as what I describe here, the colleagues have behaved as sympathetic readers who help Bill rethink his draft. Bill remains the author and controls the piece of writing; what he does with feedback is strictly up to him.

Bill's Task in the Final Stage: Editorial Feedback. When all questions about content, form, and style have been settled and the writing and revising process has come to an end, the production process begins. A text editor helps Bill prepare the text for the eyes of his readers. It is important that text editing take place only at the end of the cycle, after the writer has had several opportunities to reconceptualize and rewrite. Proofreading and publishing complete the cycle.

PART III: BENEFITS OF PEER REVIEW OF WRITING

Shortcomings of Some Old-Time Advice. Unfortunately, much of the advice that untrained reviewers give their colleagues about revising is based on rickety old habits of marking up pieces of writing. In the old way, reviewers scan the paragraphs to find fault and suggest quick-fix remedies. This is merely premature text editing that suggests rewording

before the concept is clear? Why clean up the mess when you'll throw it out later anyway? Focusing too early on the mechanical and surface aspects of writing detracts attention from rethinking and restructuring the text.

How Collaborative Peer Review Helps Writers Discover Meaning. The procedures described here for peer review of writing help reviewers break these old habits. The peers review the document not to find fault and to point it out but to lead the writer in a process of rediscovery and reconceptualization of his own text. Instead of falling back on stereotyped platitudes on the one hand or picky criticism on the other, the reviewers read attentively to follow the line of thought which the writer has laid out. In doing this, they help the writer discover his own meaning at successively deeper levels.

The sequence of the review is important. Starting a review session with a statement of the qualities of the writing reduces the possibility of offending a colleague. While this may not be so important for tough-minded experienced writers, most writers respond positively to positive feedback. When the first words the writer hears are words of genuine praise, they sound so delicious that they make the writer's ear receptive to less positive comments that are sure to follow.

Describing the contents in their own words not only shows that the reviewers have read and understood the document but lets the writer see it through fresh eyes. When it is described in this way, the writer comes to see the text as a whole, the way it is put together, and the nature and function of its parts.

The questions that reviewers ask show that they are interested enough in their colleague's work to reflect on it, and they help the writer rediscover the subject and develop devices to communicate it effectively. Finally, when it comes time to offer a suggestion, the writer has been prepared for it; maybe he will come to the same judgment just as they are mentioning it. This set of routines helps groups of writers

accept document review as a matter of course and take it for what it is—an earnest attempt to give helpful feedback.

This four-part procedure helps writers remain open to suggestions from the outside and to inspiration from within. Like most writers before a review session, Bill probably assumes that because he is the author, he knows his paper. His surprise comes when he hears someone else review his paper and he gets knowledge of it he could not otherwise have had.

PART IV: PEER REVIEW OF WRITING AND THE WRITING PROGRAM

The Larger Scheme of Things. When we contrast the casual interchange between Bill and Jane with a systematic understanding of how groups work productively, the reasons for their initial failure become clear. Bill's request was one-time, impromptu, and apparently casual. Bill expressed no clear purpose or focus for the review, nor did he follow procedures likely to elicit useful feedback. Jane had no personal stake in the document because she was not brought in on it until a late stage. Neither of them had built up an expectation that one would help the other; there was no long-term relationship of reciprocal obligation. Bill's request came out of context, out of the blue, off the wall. Because nothing had been done to establish peer review as an ongoing and expected process, Bill's failure was Jane's failure, and their mutual failure was their organization's failure.

In a fully-developed system of peer review, the four-part procedure described here suggests only the rudiments of peer review of writing; there is much more to it. And although peer review is the heart of the document cycle, it is only one part of an organization's total writing program that includes management support for writing, training of groups and individuals, controlling and monitoring writing projects,

and assessing the written products and audience response to them.

When the writing program is in place and the system of peer review is up and running, groups of colleagues use these procedures on many occasions, whether they work one-on-one or with a larger group and whether they meet one time or several times. They use them for all kinds of important documents, especially letters, proposals, and reports.

Moreover, peer review of documents lies at the heart of collaborative or joint efforts on large writing projects, where review takes place at several stages in the writing process, from inception through publishing. To make the review sessions most effective when they collaborate to produce a document, groups plan their work in detail, establish goals, norms, and procedures, and assign specific responsibilities. Each person does a share of the work, reviews the work of others, and contributes to the progress of the group. In between review sessions, the writers revise the drafts based on feedback from the group of colleagues.

PART V: BILL AND JANE AS PEER REVIEWERS

A Full System of Peer Review. In a full-fledged system of collaborative peer review, writers like Bill and Jane would have learned how to elicit and give effective feedback. To illustrate the kinds of comments that Jane ought to have given Bill, I will cite below some of the things that colleagues have told me about an earlier draft of the paper you are now reading.

> 1. *Values My Readers Have Found in the Present Paper.* This paper speaks with a clear authoritative voice. You have a good product and sell it well. It is convincing; you make me want to go out and do what you describe. Much of this is new to me, and the rest reinforces my own views. My favorite sentence is the

one about "fiddling with the words." I now see why it is important to begin with praise.

2. *Ways My Readers Have Described This Paper.* You begin with a lead that captures my attention and takes me right in to the main idea. Then you give a theoretical explanation, followed by an extended example, some benefits, and a conclusion.

3. *Questions Readers Have Asked Me About This Paper.* Why did you give the four points in two places? Do you claim that this kind of review is more efficient? How can managers monitor and control group work? Can't an editor be more than a copy editor? What is to prevent this process from becoming an empty ritual?

4. *Suggestions Readers Have Made About This Paper.* I suggest that you get right to the practical stuff, then double back to the theoretical explanation. After the opening scenario, state the benefits of collaborative peer review. End with a scenario that matches or reflects the lead. Make the benefits clear. The word "praise" seems but a saccharine call for flattery; tough-minded writers don't need it. This part of the review process may seem patronizing.

These are things that readers have said. I hope that the present version reflects their suggestions.

Conclusion. When organizations support the peer review of documents in the ways described here, they unlock latent powers in their writers. Both the writers and their colleagues learn to do things they cannot learn on their own. To be sure, organizations must never lose sight of the indispensable role of individual persons writing alone; all thoughts, words, and ideas arise in the individual mind. But in addition to the

solitude of solo writing, writers thrive on collaboration; they need the stimulation of group comment. Organizations that fail to support this kind of peer review of documents diminish the productivity of their writers.

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(The response sheet on the following page will be useful for reviewers.)

WORKSHEET FOR PEER FEEDBACK

(Based on guides by Karen Spear and Peter Elbow) 2/91

Writer _____
Responder _____

Colleagues: Can you help me rethink clarity and vigor in this paper? It is intended for people who are interested in peer review of documents but don't know much about it.

1. *Identify Values in the Paper.* Give positive feedback on your colleague's paper. What did you like about it? What are the best parts? What are the strongest points? Where did you become most interested? What ideas did you find exciting? What words struck you forcibly or resonated for you? What things surprised you?

2. *Describe the Paper.* Explain the main ideas of the paper and how it is organized. How are the lead, the body, and the end related? What did you hear as the main points of your colleague's paper? After reading the first page, where did you expect the paper to go? At that point, were you with the writer or against him? How did the paper guide your thinking? How did your knowledge and feelings change as you read? State some related topics that the paper did not include.

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