

“Writing Across Communities: Peer Reviewing Among Diverse Students”

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Increasingly, the college classroom is made up of diverse students representing a variety of ethnic, linguistic, educational, economic, and cultural backgrounds. As students enter their college careers, the freshmen English class may be one of the few small classes in which they are enrolled, providing an opportunity for students to learn more about the diversity of their peers as well as how they fit in or may become active and comfortable in the academic discourse. While embarking on writing essays for freshmen English courses is an individual pursuit, I posit that peer reviewing, inherently a group activity, is critical to the student’s understanding of this new discourse community as well as to the development of writing skills. By incorporating the methods of the Creative Writing workshop into freshmen English classes, I believe that peer reviewing can become an activity students embrace and integrate into their academic and work careers.

The Writing Across Communities initiative at the University of New Mexico strives to help students bridge the knowledge that they bring to the classroom from their diverse communities with the knowledge they need to succeed in college and in the work place. All too often our students, many of whom are first-generation college students, expect that the teacher will pour knowledge into them, that their task is to remember as much as possible of this new information. Academia is a foreign world, and it can be intimidating. I argue that peer reviewing can give students volition by letting them share their written work to a wider audience

than just the Composition teacher, and by letting them see writing as not only an individual pursuit, but also as a communal task.

The challenge as I see it is to develop a way of helping students to understand the value of peer reviewing. All too often the focus in peer reviewing is on low order concerns. Earlier in my teaching career, I was guilty of this less-than-model practice. A year before I began to teach Freshman English at the University of New Mexico, I taught a new course at Mercy College in Westchester County, New York, called "Publicity Writing." I created a syllabus that would enable students to learn to write a variety of documents for varying audiences. An activity that I included, without understanding the pedagogy behind it, was a peer reviewing component. Before students turned in final projects, I required that they exchange their written work with another student and provide feedback. I asked the student-editors to serve as proofreaders for their peers and conducted a lesson on proofreader's marks and how to use them. Imagine my surprise two weeks into the class when I had an insurrection on my hands. Students were livid that they had to perform this task, and no amount of explaining the use of it on my part could persuade them otherwise. I dropped the activity in frustration with the results of it. I was certain, however, of the value of having students read and comment on each other's work.

During the Department of English teaching assistant orientation at the University of New Mexico, I learned more about peer reviewing. I was interested to see if it could work successfully in the Freshman English classroom. With limited knowledge of the pedagogy behind peer reviewing, I worked with my English 101 class to establish guidelines. I formed groups of about four students who would work together throughout the semester; I created the groups after reading student papers. I tried to match students with different levels of writing skills. Prior to the first two peer review sessions, the students and I created a list of questions to

consider during the process, based on the paper rubric. I asked each group to create their own list of criteria for the final two peer reviews.

This activity met less resistance than I encountered with the Publicity Writing class, which I believe was a result of two things: shifting the focus to include high order concerns, and asking the students to participate in creating the guidelines for the reviews. Still, the responses too often were generic praise for an essay rather than helpful criticism. In order to increase the usefulness for all students, I tried a different approach in my English 102 class. I am a creative writing graduate student, and so I decided to incorporate techniques that were used in my workshops. In the interest of time, I divided the class into groups of three. The students exchanged essays, and I asked them to create *descriptive* critiques of their peers' work, with prompts that asked students to identify the claim of each essay, to determine if they thought that supporting evidence was explicated thoroughly, to find topic sentences, to identify the structure of the argument and to discuss the persuasiveness of the paper with the author, among other things. The critiques moved away from the generic praise that I had seen the semester before.

How, then, does this fit in with the goals of the Writing Across Communities initiative? I think the answer is three-pronged. Janet Burroway, whose excellent text *Writing Fiction* is a staple in many of UNM's undergraduate Creative Writing courses, describes her vision for the workshop, which can be applied to the freshman English peer review as well: "...while the author may or may not benefit from peer suggestions, everyone else in the workshop does, for the practice of thinking through and articulating responses to a story's challenges eventually makes all participants more objective critics of their own work" (399). The act of learning how to respond to the work of peers, as well as of how to incorporate peer responses in the revision process, then, can be of great benefit to students from all backgrounds. Critical thinking skills, a

staple in academic discourse, are developed through a descriptive peer review, and the student, in time, will learn to think critically about her own work.

Next, I believe it is important for students to understand their academic discourse community as just that: a community. Students, with good reason, often write for an audience of one: the teacher. Research in the field of composition, on the whole, supports collaborative learning. As McAndrew and Reigstad comment, “Collaborative learning by its nature opposes totalitarianism and alienation and encourages communitarianism and connectedness” (5). They cite Anne Gere in her belief that “...collaborative learning...ameliorates the alienation of society and its schools...by reorienting writers toward their readers in a way that helps them comprehend the connective nature of composing for readers” (5). The authors believe that one of the important aspects of collaborative learning is that students “experience [having] a real reader and of seeing reactions to her words” (6). Peer reviewing, then, enables students to widen the circle of their academic discourse community.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, the practice of descriptive peer reviewing offers the opportunity for students to develop comfort within the academic discourse. Peer review groups, and the widened academic discourse community that they provide, enable students to place their own work in the context of that produced by their peers and develop a sense of belonging in the academic community.

The Freshmen English classroom allows instructors to provide a model for students about how to navigate new discourse communities, a task which our students have already negotiated in other areas of their lives, but may not have been conscious of doing, and a skill that will, indeed, help them to cross the bridge between academia and their future goals.

Works Cited

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. 6th ed. Longman: New York. 2003.

McAndrew, Donald A. and Thomas J. Reigstad. *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*. Boynton/Cook Publishers: Portsmouth, NH. 2001.