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PRACTICE

Living in a Culture of Critique: Engaging Students in Authentic Peer Editing

CHRIS BRONKE

“It just seems like such a waste of time. We trade papers, pretend to care, give some feedback, and then, at least for me, go home and make no changes to my paper, unless required for a grade, and then I change a few things...”

I still remember reading this about four years ago from a year-end survey to my students. The question was, “Did peer editing help you this year?” Part of me feels like a simple “no” would have been sufficient, but this student’s insight was not only greatly appreciated but desperately needed. One thing was clear: it was time for a change.

Over the next two school years, I made it my goal to rethink, redefine, reimagine, and redo peer editing, to make it not something students “had” to do but something they *wanted* to do, asked to do. It only made sense to me; you see, at this same time, I had just adopted a new philosophy on education. In short, my goal was becoming: “Teach less while they learn more.” So, this overhaul of the peer-editing process would become one facet of an otherwise larger transformation. Now of course nothing is perfect, and the process described below can certainly be improved, adjusted, and tweaked based on individual students and class dynamics. It has proven to be much more student-centered, much more authentic, and much more valued by students. Should you choose to try it, I hope it proves the same to you.

The Process

Step 1: Target the Feedback

It is too much to ask of a 5, 10, or even 15 year-old to be able to look at a full piece of writing and try to articulate all the strengths and issues, leaving comments on both, while also being a copy editor; however, all too often, that is what traditional peer editing ends up being. Over the last several years, there has been a push for teachers to target their feedback more specifically, perhaps only using two rows of a five or six row rubric; however, as a whole, we have not helped students make that same shift. We must help our students know how to ask for targeted feedback.

What the Teacher Does

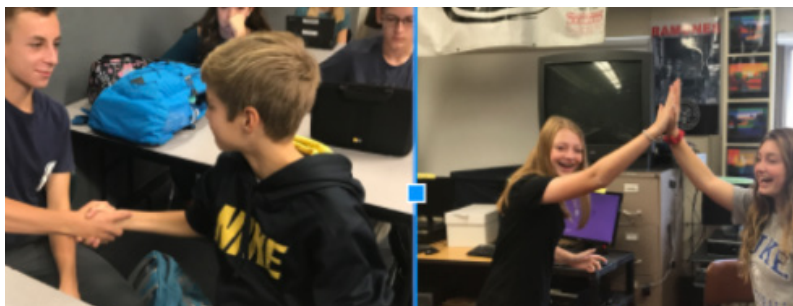
In order to help students master this first step, the teachers must do two things. First, he or she needs to model this skill with his/her own writing (and yes, all teachers--especially those who teach writing--should ALWAYS have their own writing on which they are working). To help my students better be able to set goals for an editing session, I



Once students know what kind of feedback they need, the conversations become more meaningful.

will bring in a piece (or even an unfinished piece) of my writing, share it with them, and say something like, “I am really having trouble with transitioning out of paragraph two and into paragraph three without sounding redundant; can you all take a look, let me know

what you think, and make a few suggestions?” Consistently modeling how we talk about our own writing will quickly empower students to feel confident doing so with their own, and it will also help them develop the vernacular to do so effectively. Without the right language, they are unable to be precise in what part(s) of their paper needs feedback. The other move that the teacher must make is providing the time for students to critically self-edit/reflect upon their own work first before getting into peer-editing groups. While every class is different, I have found that this step does not happen with much deliberate thought when asked to be done as a homework assignment. It is just too easy for them to brush it off and/or rush through it. So, I give students the first ten minutes or so each day before we start peer-editing to self-edit/reflect upon their work with the aim of creating this list of feedback requests for their partner.



Some students know their partners well, while others are meeting them for the first time.

What the Students Do

The student role in step one is simple on the surface but deeply challenging in practice. Simply put, the students have to WANT to get critical feedback from a peer. Without this in place, students have a tendency to self-select “incorrectly”, choosing areas of their paper that may not actually need much help as a defense mechanism, to avoid having to hear harsh realities about their writing. I have often said that writing is one of the most intimate acts in life, so it is not surprising that students are afraid of critical feedback. However, that doesn’t give us or them a way out as we all know that virtually no piece of writing reaches its highest potential without multiple rounds of varied feedback. While there are a vast array of strategies to help with this, here are two quick ways I have helped students be more comfortable in this. First, one of my class’s year-long goals is “embrace and live in a culture of critique”, and so the concept and process of critique are a direct part of everything we do. Second, I never grade a piece of writing, no matter how big or small,

that hasn’t been edited by at least one other person. While seemingly a time-consuming step, the value add to the culture it creates is worth the investment.

Step 2: Group Deliberately

There are, as we all know, a plethora of ways to group students--entire books have been written on this topic; however, when it comes to the topic of peer editing, we must be more deliberate with gathering the needed data to truly

put each student in the right pairing or group in order to maximize productivity when peer-editing.

What the Teacher Does

Over the last few years I have been surveying my student to gather valuable information about their dispositions with regards to peer editing. Two of the more powerful questions are:

- If you are allowed to choose a partner, how do you do this?
I pick someone I know can really help me, regardless of friendship.
I pick a friend--even if I know they might not provide the best feedback.
- If you know someone really well, is it easier or harder to give and get honest feedback?
Harder
Easier
Explain why.

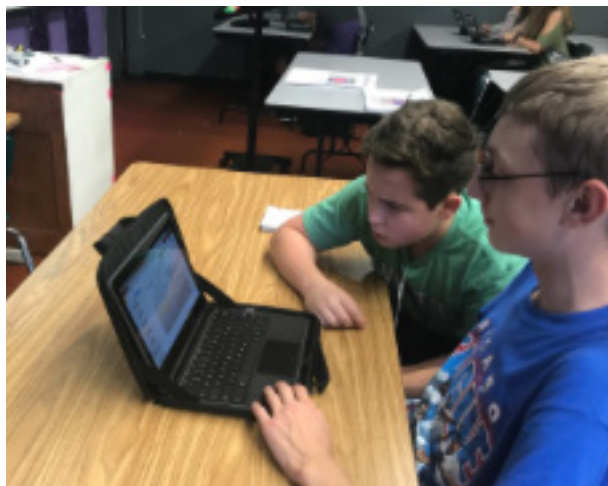
These questions (and many more) have been instrumental in helping me create pairs. As I talked about earlier, sharing one’s writing is an intimate act, and one that not all students (or adults...) are fully comfortable doing with just any of their peers. Because of this fact, I used to just let students pick a partner, but what I found out through this survey is

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that often times they would just pick a friend, even if they knew that person wouldn't give great feedback. So, now I use this data (and other information I know about the students) to create the right pairings in which each student is safe and paired with someone who will help give them the needed feedback in a respectful manner. For some pairs, they may be great friends and that works; for others, they might not know one another when the year starts, and that is okay, too. It is all about intentionality based on the collected data.

What the Students Do

This step is a relatively low ask for the students. They just need to be honest on the survey and listen to me when I explain my rationale behind the groups. I am sure to take time in class to explain why the survey is so important, and also to explain why the pairings are what they are (noting "some of you might be with a close friend and others with someone you don't know well, and either is great because I promise you that you are with the right person to best help you improve the most"). Obviously, we cannot force students to do either of these, but if we build the right classroom conditions, this is not a stretch and actually becomes the easiest of the four steps.



This pair chooses to use one screen for feedback.

Step 3: Discuss Feedback Style

Early in my teaching career, before I started surveying students about peer editing, I used to "force" students to give feedback the same way, usually creating some template to guide them through the process thinking it was helping them stay focused; however, what this failed to do was take into account the needs of the individual writers. As we look to make peer-editing more student-centered, we must empower students to both know and seek feedback in the ways they most need it.

What the Teacher Does

In working with teacher-writers from across the country

as part of the *National Blogging Collaborative*, I have learned that writers need feedback in different ways, and as I have surveyed my students more and more, I have learned that they are no different. Some students always want a grade as part of the feedback (and while I try to discourage that--that is the system we have). Other students only want to know what isn't working and might not even want a suggestion for improvement as they will want to figure it out on their own. Still some will want the feedback orally and others in writing.

There are students who will want a rubric to be used and others who don't even know what a rubric is. The list goes on and on. Therefore, teachers must do three things to help students with this. First, survey their students. This does two things: it provides needed data about the student but more importantly it helps the students reflect on how they like feedback to be given. Here are some questions used for this:

- I like it when a teacher uses a rubric to give me feedback.
Strongly agree
Agree
Disagree
Strongly disagree
Please explain why:
- I like it when a teacher talks to me about my paper, sharing feedback orally.
Strongly agree
Agree
Disagree
Strongly disagree
Please explain why:
- I like it when a teacher leaves comments for feedback on my paper.
Strongly agree
Agree
Disagree

Strongly disagree

Please explain why:

- I like knowing the grade my paper would get in its current state prior to the final due date.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Please explain why:

Second, teachers should model the wide-range of ways writers can receive feedback. If you think back to step one, I mentioned bringing in my writing to model targeted feedback, but what I didn't mention in that step is that I do that in a wide-range of modes so that students are exposed to these AND get comfortable providing feedback in multiple modes.

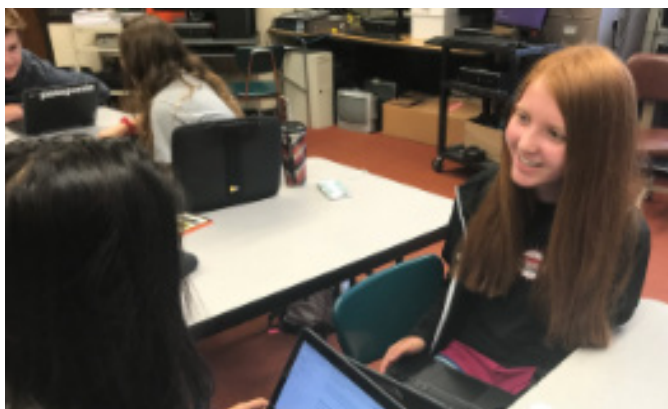
Third, we must encourage and provide opportunities for students to reflect upon this as the year goes on because this is something that can change as their writing improves but also with each specific assignment. Some questions I use to do this are:

- Your confidence in writing first drafts has:
 - Greatly increased
 - Increased
 - Decreased
 - Greatly decreased
 Please explain why:
- Your skill as a writer has:
 - Greatly increased
 - Increased
 - Stayed the same
 Please explain why you feel this way.

- As a result of your current confidence as a writer and skill as a writer, in what ways might the way(s) you receive feedback on your paper have change? Please be specific in your response.

What the Student Does

This is probably the easiest step for students as it is low lift and low risk. They just need to take a survey and think critically about their past experiences with feedback, considering what works and what doesn't for them. But I promise you, the workload for the student is about to become real!



Students choosing to share their feedback verbally.

Step 4: Rethink the Process

If one were to walk into a classroom to observe a more traditional method of peer-editing, he or she might not even know it is going on because students would have swapped papers and would just be quietly working to provide feedback; it might look no different than the drafting process, quite frankly. But if we really want authentic, student-centered learning to come out of peer-editing, we must re-think the entire process of actually peer-editing.

What the Teacher Does

I know you are probably saying, "I thought the kids were gonna learn more while I thought LESS? Because right now it seems like in each of these first three steps, the work for the teacher is robust while the students just fill out some surveys." You are correct; however, since you have done the first three steps, all you need to do now is explain the process and get (and stay) out of the way.

What the Students Do

This, more than any of the first three steps, is where the magic happens for the kids, their learning and their growth

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as writers. There is an old cliché that asserts “two is better than one”, and with the exception of some outliers, few would disagree with that statement. Traditionally, if we apply this logic to peer editing, it would simply mean doing a few rounds of peer editing to get more than one student’s feedback, but that is not what I am suggesting (although that is never a bad thing). If we really want students to be leading the process and getting authentic feedback, they must review each piece together, not by trading. Let’s take a look at this in practice:

****note:** both partners should have a copy of the paper being edited in front of them (could be the same “copy” via Google or two printed versions)

1: Student A reads his own paper aloud to both himself and to Student B. As he does so, both should stop to mark (and fix) small errors, typos, awkward sentences and such. They will get into the routine of and used to saying “wait, stop for a second” when needed.

2: Student A then shares what, specifically, he would like in terms of targeted feedback and how he wants to receive that. This is where steps one and three in this whole process come into play. Students won’t know this crucial information if you haven’t helped them learn this.

3: Student B now reads student A’s paper aloud to both of them while paying attention for and making note of areas to provide the requested targeted feedback. By switching the reader, the writer now will have gotten to read his own paper aloud and hear someone else read his. So during this step the writer should continue to mark for what doesn’t “sound right.”

4: Student B should now give student A feedback in the requested way(s).

Step 5: Repeat & Revise

After flipping partners and repeating steps one through four,

both students now begin thinking about what changes need to be made in the paper. They do so while still sitting next to one another so that they can ask clarifying questions, run small parts of new drafts by their partner, and discuss the revisions as needed.

****note:** depending on the types of technology available at your school, you might choose to ask or at least offer that students record any or all of the steps in this process so they have the audio of the readings and the conversations to go back to later.

The reality is this, and rather simple, as writing instructors, we know the value that being able to give and receive authentic feedback brings to the writing process and product. But we must ask ourselves this one simple question: are we doing enough to help our students to value this, too, to embrace giving and getting meaningful feedback as part of the writing process, as critical as brainstorming or drafting or revising? I won’t speak for others, but I know in my classroom, I was not. I was falling woefully short of helping students make the needed dispositional shift to embrace peer editing as valuable, as meaningful, as essential to great writing. However, by following the four steps I have outlined in this piece, students now have the time, space, personal reflection, and commitment to a process that not only can help improve their writing but can assist in supporting them as they live in an authentic culture of critique.

Chris Bronke is in his 13th year in education and has spent the last six as English Department Chair at Downers Grove North High School. In that role, he teaches one class a day and spends the rest of the day as an administrator, observing teachers, overseeing budgets and schedules, designing PD, and leading curriculum development. He is also the co-founder and director of the *National Blogging Collaborative*, a non-profit organization developed to provide writing support and PD to teachers. You can follow Christopher on Twitter @MrBronke.