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The Effect of Student Peer Response and Assessment on the Proficiency of Writing Traits at the College Level

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WRITING RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS
Closing Write-up 2010-2011

Researchers' Names and Department:

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Title of Study:

THE EFFECT OF STUDENT PEER RESPONSE AND ASSESSMENT ON THE PROFICIENCY OF WRITING TRAITS AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL

Research Question:

How does student peer response and assessment impact the writing traits of college students?

Method:

The study was designed to measure changes in student writing traits following a process of peer response. Ninety-one students participated in the project, each submitting two versions of a 4-6 page position paper—an initial draft and then a final version of the paper following peer review and assessment. In addition to written comments from readers, five different writing traits were rated on a scale of 1-4 for each draft: conventions, organizational structure, rhetorical style, critical assessment, and substantiation. These ratings were then compared to measure changes between the initial and final drafts. Finally, an exit survey was used to gather additional data and reaction from the participants. Efforts were taken to ensure the quality and objectivity of the reader responses through both written and oral instruction, as well as evaluative review of feedback. All authors and readers remained anonymous to one another.

Key Findings:

While the positive effect of peer response on writing traits was clearly seen, the findings of the study were somewhat mixed not only between the various writing traits being measured, but also between the participants' responses on the exit survey and the separate ratings data collected. The exit survey suggests that peer response and assessment was viewed as having had a rather noticeable positive impact on certain traits—namely conventions and critical assessment, while exhibiting only a negligible effect on others—most notably rhetorical style. However, while the separate ratings data that was collected concurred with the exit survey in suggesting a noticeable impact on conventions and organizational structure, this set of data seemed to contradict the exit survey's findings that critical assessment was also significantly impacted. In fact, while the ratings data suggested some improvement, it was much less noticeable than in any other category. Further research is required to investigate and reconcile these inconsistencies. A positive trend was identified in all categories by both the exit survey and the ratings data.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

Although there was discord between the two sets of data with respect to the critical assessment trait, it may be that the nature of the writing assignment itself made that trait less difficult to evaluate. The participants were asked to critically analyze a current event of a controversial nature. It should be reasonably obvious in that context when a student is simply summarizing, rather than assessing and analyzing, the issue in question. If an author fails to take a clear and specific position on the subject being addressed by the paper, then the peer responder could easily identify areas where the author needs to clarify their advocacy. While it may be difficult for the inexperienced writer to suggest revisions in the author's rhetorical style when his or her own writing style is not yet well established, it is not very difficult for students of differing skill levels to see if the author has summarized versus analyzed. The same could be said of the more relative ease with which a peer respondent might notice obvious conventional errors.

In the traits which did not see marked improvement, it may be that the writing skills of the responding students were not sufficient to produce the desired improvements in their peers who were deficient in the same writing

traits. For instance, not a single participant listed rhetorical style as most positively affected by peer review, but it was most often selected as the least positively affected trait. The nuanced and subjective nature of evaluating traits such as rhetorical style increases the likelihood that students who are not as experienced in writing are less comfortable with editing the author's "voice".

It is interesting to note that not only did the vast majority of participants feel that the feedback they had received from their peer helped them to improve their writing skills (16% "significantly", 45% "moderately", 31% "limited", and 8% "none"), but the majority also felt that their own experience of having read and critically responded to someone else's written work had actually improved their own writing skills as well (14% "significantly", 49% "moderately", 25% "limited", and 12% "none"). This is an important element of the teaching-learning dynamic that clearly warrants further investigation.

Implications for Further Study:

Because this course is a General University Requirement (one of a number of courses that satisfies a particular requirement for graduation), servicing students from multiple disciplines and various class standing, it should be expected that students will have a fairly wide range of experience levels. In a class where the majority of students are at a more homogenous level of writing skill, the peer respondent's review is perhaps more likely to engage the author's rhetorical style, and thus have a greater impact on the final product in that trait as well. It seems reasonable to assume that not only would more assessment and review experience be a partial solution to this challenge, but it is also likely that additional guidance and instruction in the assessment and evaluation process would be beneficial.

While offering additional support for the notion that peer response and assessment of written work has a positive impact on the writing traits of college students, the scope of this study did not allow the consideration of a number of variables that may have influenced the outcome, such as previous writing instruction or experience with peer response and assessment. The findings suggest that further research which takes these variables into account is needed. Additional controls on verifying the consistency and quality of the ratings procedure, such as additional respondents rating the same written work, would also strengthen the veracity of the findings.