Introducing A Peer Review System Targeting Shared Understanding and Actionable Feedback

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Abstract

This paper looks at some of the potential benefits peer review offers and some of the difficulties. It examines my attempts to develop and trial a teaching approach activating the advantages and mitigating the potential difficulties involved in peer review. It also considers how to address culturally specific challenges possibly inhibiting successful peer review for Japanese students. The approach is described in a cycle of four demarcated steps: (a) the reviewer commenting on observable facts, (b) the reviewer adding appropriate advice, (c) the reviewer adding praise and/or evaluation and (d) the reviewee reevaluating the essay in light of the feedback and analyzing options. Classroom observations and feedback from students in tutorials suggest this approach and the system of steps seem to facilitate smoother and more effective peer review and assist in developing writing revision skills. This could be due to the construction of a shared understanding for the peer review process by using the four-step framework.

One of the goals for first year students in the English for Liberal Arts program at International Christian University is to develop a proficient level of academic writing skills in English. Student peer review of written work in the Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) course in the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) program at International Christian University (ICU) in Japan is widely regarded by program teachers as a valuable activity in the development of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) student writers. A key purpose for this is to support students in their efforts taking English Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses in the ICU College of Liberal Arts (CLA). The CLA consists of the various departments (Psychology, History, International Relations etc.) making up the over 30 majors students can choose from at ICU. Depending on their level of English, new students at ICU will spend more or less time in the ELA program. However, all students are encouraged to take subsequent courses in English in the various departments. As these EMI courses require students to work in and through English for the entire course, they need to develop both the technical skills required for academic writing at the college level and further, a self-reliant attitude towards successful handling and completion of written course assignments. Successful peer review potentially offers three valuable benefits for EAP students in the ELA to achieve these goals. Firstly, students can become more aware of the reader and consequently become more self-regulatory in evaluating their own work. Secondly, peer review can lead to more efficient progress when students reflect on and revise their writing.

Finally, within the writing cycle of peer review students can develop and practice critical thinking skills.

Three Benefits of Peer Review

Firstly, in ELA classes, student peer review of written work is employed by many instructors to assist students in working towards gaining an outside view of their writing and becoming more self-regulatory writers. The process of peer review, in that students are involved in observation, analysis and evaluation of other student work, means that along with reviewing what makes good academic writing students are able to take on the role of an editor or critic. They can become more conscious of taking the outside perspective of a reader (Hyland, 2003). Within this outside role they can become, to some extent, gate keepers of what constitutes good writing in peer review and are exposed to opportunities to reflect on the elements of effective academic writing and their own writing. Peer review then can lead to students becoming more responsible self-editors (Lam, 2010).

Further, peer review has been shown to have a positive impact on the overall quality of student essay writing from high levels to lower levels of proficiency (Kamimura, 2006). It has been found to be valuable in developing improved writing quality both for the student receiving the feedback in revising their own work (Min, 2005), and for the student giving the feedback, also in terms of improving their own writing (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). However, particularly important for peer review is the importance of training students in understanding and giving feedback to facilitate higher quality and effectiveness in the process (Kondo, 2004; Min, 2005, 2016). The peer review feedback can then become a more powerful activity so that "receiving feedback is incredibly empowering. Why? Because it enables the individual to move forwards, to plot, plan, adjust, rethink, and thus exercise self-regulation in realistic and balanced ways" (Hattie & Yates, 2014, p. 66). Thus, comprehensible and actionable peer review helps both the reviewer and reviewee in understanding how to move more efficiently and autonomously in moving forward with revisions in improving and refining their writing.

Finally, peer review seems to have an impact on the improvement of critical thinking skills (Min, 2006). Paul and Elder (2008, p. 5) identify eight key concepts in their checklist for critical thinking.
a) All reasoning has a purpose.
b) All reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, to settle some question, solve some problem.
c) All reasoning is based on assumptions.
d) All reasoning is done from a point of view.
e) All reasoning is based on data, information and evidence.
f) All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, concepts and ideas.
g) All reasoning contains inferences or interpretations by which we draw conclusions and give meaning to data.
h) All reasoning leads somewhere or has implications and consequences.

For teachers of writing, peer review offers an opportunity for teachers to have their students apply some of these concepts in the writing cycle. The purpose of reasoning in the peer review is to improve the writing. Therefore, the problem to solve, or the attempt to answer a question is what feedback will be most effective in doing this. The feedback should

be based on information and evidence from the writing. Finally, the feedback leads to consequences and implications for the writer in how they revise their writing. For ELA teachers, peer review can help students internalize critical thinking processes connected to writing which will likely help them write more clearly and effectively throughout their college life.

For ELA teachers, peer review of written work then is an activity with strong potential to lead to teachable moments, accelerate the development of student academic writing skills and offer an opportunity to strengthen critical thinking skills. However, some formidable challenges also stand in the way of effective, smooth, and successful student peer review.

Some Potential Obstacles

From my experience teaching ARW for the past six years, first year ELA students tend to be novice reviewers (and reviewees) and they often have little or no experience or practice in peer review. They often do not have a clear understanding of how to effectively give actionable feedback, nor how to respond to it.

To address this, in the past I have covered the elements of effective academic writing in classes and used peer-review checklists when conducting peer review work with my students. I would give students a checklist of academic writing elements for them to look at while they conducted the peer review. Their task was to look at the checklist, compare it to the writing and give feedback.

However, although my students understood the elements of academic writing, they still seemed to be offering less than effective feedback. Typically, I heard students make statements such as that they liked this or that part of the writing, they thought something was interesting, or that a word was spelled incorrectly. Or they would simply list items from the checklists. In these initial attempts to offer feedback, often students tended to focus on giving praise and/or disorganized remarks based on the checklists often without any rationale. From the reaction of students in class and in tutorials, I felt that this kind of feedback was making it difficult for the student receiving the feedback to know how to concretely work towards improvement and revision of their writing on their own. The feedback seemed muddled and disjointed, and students did not appear to have a clear and common understanding and/or expectation of the activity.

There were two other issues that I increasingly began to feel were important elements in moving closer towards more successful peer review. Firstly, although in Japan previous research has indicated that Japanese students in general seem to have fairly positive feelings about engaging in peer review (Hirose, 2008; Saito & Fujita, 2004), there is a high sensitivity to social appropriateness and a strong tendency to avoid confrontational language. Watanabe comments that in the Japanese communication style "confrontation is to be avoided as it disrupts harmony within a group" (1993, p. 180). Further, in the very nature of the Japanese language, disagreement is often expressed ambiguously and the communication style displays a strong preference for the maintenance of group harmony (Kitao & Kitao, 1985). These factors mean Japanese students in general will take care in maintaining the class in-group harmony which may be an influence preventing the critical and personal feedback important for effective peer review. Without knowing how to do offer feedback in a shared, constructive, and non-threatening way Japanese students may tend to be hesitant to offer any feedback in peer review that could be construed as negatively impacting on their interpersonal

relationships. They may be very cautious regarding criticizing the work of their classmates. In my experience, this caution does tend to be an significant factor in the communication style. Avoidance of appearing to criticize has been found to be an issue in peer review activities by Chinese EFL writers (Wang, 2014). The other issue was that some students especially those in teacher-centered cultures, such as China and Japan, may even doubt the effectiveness of peer review with other students to be in any way valuable and worthwhile (Hu, 2005). For example, in my class one student put his hand up and challenged me in front of the class, "Why are we doing this peer review work? We are all pretty much the same level, we can't really help each other get better." Put on the spot by this student, I struggled to find a confident and convincing answer.

This challenge, along with the other benefits and obstacles noted above forced me to reevaluate some of my ideas and methods regarding my approach, or lack of, to peer review. What was the purpose of peer review? Was it effective to have students do this together? If it was effective, then how could students be trained to do it with confidence and proficiency? In what way, and through what method could students be coached to encourage them to become more self-reliant and less focused on seeing the teacher as the writing authority? How could a system access the advantages and avoid the difficulties? What system might be effective taking the Japanese communication style into account? Reflection on these issues and questions provided motivation to start experimenting with a range of methods in student training for peer review. Initially, there was a struggle to build a framework for peer review training that targeted these specific challenges faced in my academic writing class. However, a path to a workable solution became clearer by combining peer review with critical thinking. The peer review work in academic writing and critical thinking naturally goes together as the thinking process in peer review is a critical one of observation, analysis, and evaluation and can be systemized.

Preparation For the Four Step System

Wiggins (2012) identifies four terms as providing a good starting point for thinking more deeply about feedback, these being *praise, compliments, advice,* and *evaluation*. He claims that although these are often used in giving feedback none of these by themselves truly constitute feedback. Wiggins defines feedback as, "concrete, specific, and useful; it provides actionable information" (2012, para. 20), and he claims feedback is found when "information was conveyed about the effects of my actions as related to a goal" (para. 9). Statements of praise, compliments and evaluation tend to be vague, and these can often lack the concreteness and specificity for actionable feedback. Advice without a connection to a well-defined goal leads to uncertainty as to what the feedback means.

From students, praise and compliments are often typically statements that a certain part of the writing is good. For evaluation, it can be statements that the introduction or conclusion is not interesting. Regarding advice, it is often simple direction such as to write more for a certain paragraph. While these kinds of comments can and do play a useful role in peer review, they frequently leave students hesitant about how to progress in their process of revising and rewriting, thus lacking in the "actionable information" pointed out by Wiggins (2012) as being a vital part of feedback. In my experience, after these kind of comments students then come for tutorials and repeat the comments from their peers that they had received in the peer review. Then, they would ask me what they should do.

Following the direction provided by Wiggins (2012) in understanding feedback, students need to have a clear understanding of the terms praise, compliments, advice, and evaluation. Therefore, to help students understand this distinction, one way is to ask them to work in pairs to write down examples of comments they think fit into the four categories: praise, compliments, advice, and evaluation. Students then discuss their lists with other pairs, followed by a whole class discussion, leading to greater understanding of how these terms can be understood and differentiated.

Once students are clearly differentiating the four terms, the next phase is understanding what actionable information will clearly first point the reviewee towards ideas for revising, rewriting and adding to their work. This information is related to EAP writing skills such as written organization, clarity, support, and correct formatting. Through in-class activities and analysis of sample academic texts students have built up their own awareness of what effective and successful academic writing consists of. In groups, students then make a list of what could constitute actionable information regarding writing. These are all factual observations that could be made regarding a written piece of work. An example of a fact regarding organization could be that the reviewer states that there is no transition word between the ideas in sentence four and five in paragraph four. For support, the writer has not provided a source for quoted statistics. For formatting, the text is not double spaced. And for clarity, the word "people" could refer to any group of people. These are all issues that the reviewer can observe and point to within the writing.

The Four Step System

Now that students are equipped with a clear idea of how to think about what constitutes feedback and to begin their feedback with clear observations, they are ready to move on to learn and apply the four steps. The four steps are a cycle in which in the first three steps the reviewer leads, while in the final step the initiative moves to the reviewee.

In Step One, the reviewer makes a factual observation based on what the peer reviewer can see in the writing. For example, in Step One the reviewer might look at the writing and observe that there is no transition word between the ideas in sentence four and five of body paragraph two.

In Step Two, the reviewer gives some advice on how the writer could address the observed issue. For example, in Step One the reviewer might comment that there is no transition word between the ideas, then the reviewer could suggest two or three possible words that could be used to link these ideas.

In Step Three, the reviewer gives some praise or encouragement. Using the previous example, in Step One the peer reviewer would make the observation that there is no transition word between the ideas, then the reviewer could suggest two or three possible transition words that could be used to link these ideas, finally the reviewer could say that the two interesting ideas already there will become even more powerful and persuasive.

In Step Four, the reviewee considers the feedback and some subsequent possible options. The reviewee considers whether to accept the feedback as is, ask for a second opinion from another peer, book a tutorial with the instructor to discuss the solution, or visit the Writing Support Desk at ICU to discuss the work with a writing tutor. This step is done individually after the class peer review round is finished when students have time in class to reflect on the feedback they have received.

Conclusion

If students follow this cycle, the flow of the in-class peer review is likely to be based on a clear and shared system and common expectations. The students have "rules" that are understood and followed by both sides. In trying this system what I first noticed was that students quickly became comfortable and proficient using it. Second, as students used the system repeatedly they became able to work through larger amounts of writing and give more feedback. Also, importantly, I have found that when students take care to follow this four-step process in their peer review, they are more likely to understand what form their revision should take. Now in tutorials students are less likely to ask me what to do about peer reviewer comments and are instead are more likely to ask my opinion of their revisions. That they are asking about their own revisions seems to reflect that students are becoming more self-regulating due to having a clear direction in which to apply their thinking and writing revisions process. It also saves considerable time and allows tutorials to focus on discussion of solutions rather than trying to decipher feedback comments that students received in peer review a few days ago or a week ago. Further, it can be conjectured that the more students internalize for themselves a simple system of peer review that they perceive as effective then the more they will be likely to apply themselves to the task in class, and also to become more self-regulated and conduct peer review with classmates outside of class.

My intuition as a teacher of academic writing in Japan is that this system is heading in the right direction. It seems to address the culturally specific context and the academic skills students need to develop. It encourages students to refer to and apply their own autonomous knowledge of academic writing to become more self-regulating and objective regarding their writing. However, more careful research into and examination of the pedagogical value of this step approach, the student interaction during the activity, the influence of specific cultural factors, and outcomes of the process will be needed to strengthen the support for this system.

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