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Helping Freshmen Revise: Collaborative Peer Review through the Eyes of Students

Author Biography

Jean S. Filetti is a Professor of English and Director of Teacher Preparation at Christopher Newport University. She also serves as Treasurer for the Virginia Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (VACTE). In the Department of English, she teaches courses in composition, professional writing, and American literature. As Director of Teacher Preparation, she supervises student internships and teaches educational pedagogy.

Helping Freshmen Revise: Collaborative Peer Review through the Eyes of Students

Peer review entered the mainstream in writing instruction pedagogy in the 1980s as an important part of scaffolding the writing process in part due to the vision of Peter Elbow, Anne Ruggles Gere, and others (Myers, Spear). Whether used at the idea-generating stage or at various points in the drafting process, instructors of composition have employed peer review to address wide-ranging composing issues. Today, most composition handbooks used in college-level writing classes contain chapters on the peer-review process that offer guiding questions to use during peer editing, advice to students on how to keep comments tactful and useful, and sample peer-review activities—all of which support the workshop model in composition courses.

Despite peer review being a well-established component of writing courses, it has its identified drawbacks (students not staying on task during the peer-review session, the inexperience of the student reviewer, and the writer not trusting his or her peers). However, research does suggest that “students can learn to identify global issues and holistic mismatches” (Paulson, Alexander, and Armstrong 329). First-year college students, however, are not likely to bring these skills into the classroom, so instructors in these early composition classes must help students learn these skills.

Along with support of integrating peer review into writing courses by teachers and its support by the textbooks adopted for composition courses, research has also tackled such questions as whether peer feedback is as effective as teacher feedback (Gielen et al.), the difference between oral or written peer review (McAlexander), and if peer review de-centers the teacher and empowers the student (Keating). Few studies, however, have examined the students’ perception of the peer-review process, and those, in the last decade, that have examined student perception have involved English language learners (Zhu and Mitchell; Nelson and Murphy).

Brammer and Rees' study of student perceptions of peer review at a private university, whose population the researchers describe as homogenous (white, suburban, and middle-class), does suggest that how students value peer review is connected to their professors' commitment to its use by setting aside class time to prepare students to be peer reviewers and using the process frequently in the course. However, the types of peer-review used in the classes surveyed were defined as either "required" (done in class or out of class) or "encouraged" (Brammer and Rees 76). Additionally, most of the students in the study also reported that they received "no formal instruction in peer reviewing" or were "given a handout on how to peer review" (78).

Moving beyond the "required" vs. "encouraged" descriptors for types of peer review, when and what are students being asked to peer review and what are their perceptions of the peer-review process when they are intentionally prepared in the classroom to be collaborators, not correctors? More importantly, given the different focuses of peer-review sessions, what types of collaborative review do students find helpful and why? With these important questions in mind, this study examined student perceptions of three types of peer review used at different stages of the writing process: 1) idea-generation, 2) targeted/section specific/skill specific, and 3) whole paper. The goal was to determine if and why students find these different collaborative efforts helpful in the composing process.

Demographics

This study surveyed first-year students at a public liberal arts university in Virginia enrolled in a required First-Year Writing Seminar. A total of 52 students participated in the evaluation of peer review in the writing seminar with 27 of the 52 students taking the course in the 2018 fall semester and 25 taking the course in the 2019 spring semester. Each group of

students had different instructors, with each instructor using peer review as a formative process in the course.

Overview of the First-Year Writing Seminar Involved in the Study

The course that forms the basis of this study is a required course for all students with the exception of those students in the Honors College and students who are exempt from the course based on an AP score of “4” or higher on the English Language and Composition test. In the course, students are introduced to the conventions of reading and writing appropriate for liberal arts learning, in particular the ability to analyze and produce sophisticated arguments, proposals, reports, and analyses. To successfully complete the course, students are required to meet the following objectives:

1. To demonstrate proficiency in reading, evaluating, and understanding arguments from various academic disciplines,
2. To learn and use terms specific to argumentation,
3. To summarize and evaluate, accurately and coherently, argumentative prose,
4. To discover and express connections among arguments in various academic disciplines,
5. To understand and explain rhetorical strategies in argumentative prose,
6. To develop and write effective arguments using multiple sources, research, and documentation, and
7. To demonstrate reasonable mastery of correct, varied, and coherent standard English and MLA manuscript guidelines.

Exposure of the Study’s First-Year Undergraduates to Peer Review

Both instructors who participated in this study are full-time and have taught composition at the university for over a decade. Additionally, the peer review process in both sections of the seminar that comprise this study was face-to-face peer review in the classroom, not peer review in an online environment. Students were also prepared to be effective reviewers through modeling, formal instruction, and role playing.

Peer Review's Impact on Student Writing

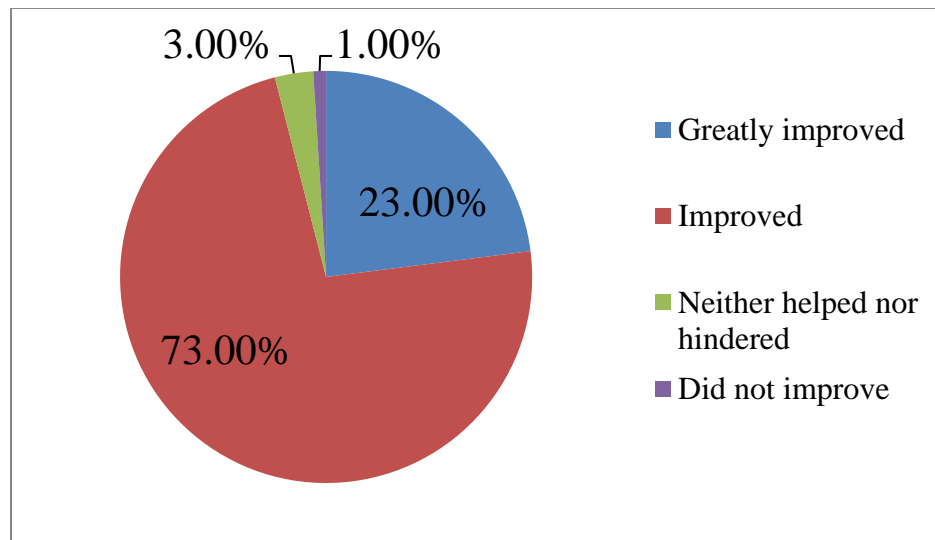
In the last week of the semester long courses, students were surveyed anonymously to determine if they found peer review helpful as they revised their drafts for submission, which type of peer-review they found most helpful, and what their comfort level was with the review process. For the complete survey, see Appendix A.

Results of Survey: Impact of Peer Review on Revision

As indicated in Figure 1 below, approximately 96% of the survey respondents indicated that the peer-review sessions either “greatly improved” or “improved” their writing.

Figure 1.

Did the Peer-Review Sessions Help You Improve the Paper?



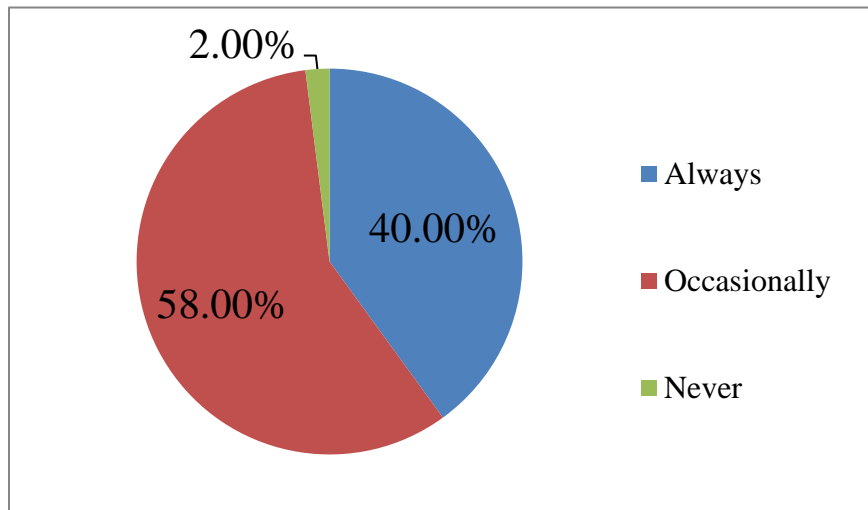
In addition, many of the comments on the survey offer evidence that the peer-review sessions pinpointed many of the benefits of collaborative review. Many students envision peer review as a process through which surface-level errors are identified and corrected. One student stated that the sessions “helped [him] fix mistakes that [he] didn’t necessarily see because [he] had been looking at it [the paper] for so long.” Another commented: “Having other students peer review the whole paper allowed me to have an extra set of eyes to see errors that I may have missed

while writing my paper.” Although both these students acknowledge peer review helped them “fix” or “correct” a paper, others noted more holistic or global benefits, such as exchanging ideas, gaining different perspectives, and discovering from peers “what makes a paper interesting.”

Additionally, students also noted that they benefited from reading the drafts of their classmates. An overwhelming 98% of students indicated that they “learned” from their peers’ writing and were helped by being exposed to different approaches to the topic or reading “in different ways [they] may not have thought of.” As noted in Figure 2, students noted that their thinking was reinforced when they saw their peers offer a similar analysis.

Figure 2.

Did Reading the Papers of Other Students in the Class Help You Revise Your Own Paper?



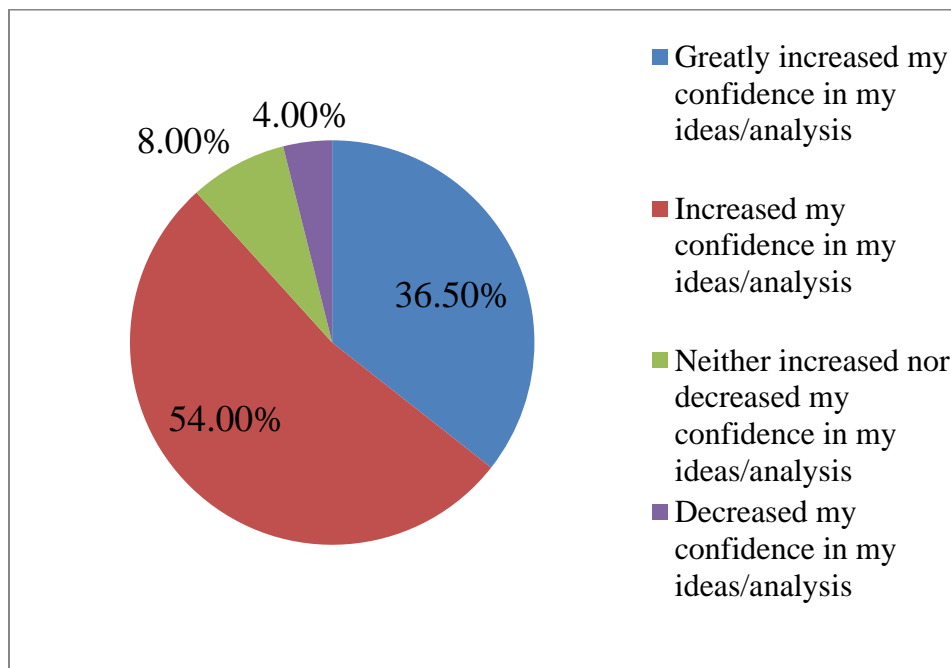
Peer Review and Student Comfort Level

Several questions on the survey were designed to uncover elements of peer review that may undermine student “buy-in” in the process. If, for example, student writers perceive their reviewers as novices who offer nothing useful in their reviews or, even worse, make them uncomfortable with collaborative learning, then they may become resistant to the benefits of

collaborative meaning-making. According to Benjamin Keating, “Collaborative learning strategies such as peer review empower students to ‘initiate’ each other instead of relying on an instructor for this initiation” (59). The study was especially interested in assessing students’ comfort level with the process and determining if reviewers’ comments negatively affected writer confidence. As indicated in Figure 3, students overwhelmingly noted peer review’s positive impact on their confidence as writers.

Figure 3.

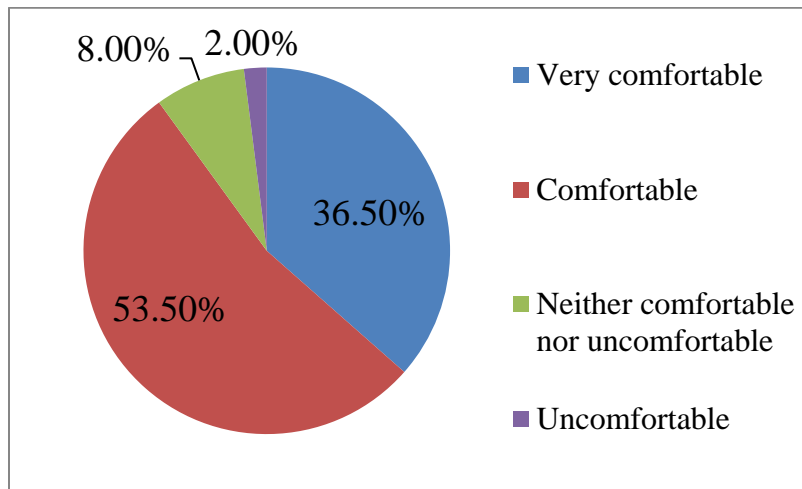
How Did the Comments Made by Your Peers During Peer-Review Sessions Make You Feel?



Additionally, they were comfortable with the comments they received from their peers, which indicates a level of trust in the process (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

How Did the Comments Made by Your Peers During Peer-Review Sessions Make You Feel?



Types of Peer Review: What Students Indicate Works and Why

Although using different forms of peer review can help writers and teachers address the non-linear process of composing and multiple ways in which students compose and learn, hearing what kind of peer review students find valuable is important. The largest percentage of students in the study (56%) favored whole paper peer review, with idea-generation garnering the smallest percentage (12%). Those who liked targeted peer review (32%) said it allowed them to focus on specific sections of the paper, to look at the paper “one part at a time.” Many also noted that the reviewers’ comments were more specific when smaller parts of the paper, rather than the whole paper, were reviewed. As noted above, however, the majority felt having the whole paper reviewed helped the readers “get a better picture of the paper,” “understand what the writer is saying,” and “see how the ideas flowed and are connected.” Interestingly, comments of those who selected whole paper review focused more on how that specific peer review helped the reader, whereas the comments of those who selected targeted peer review focused more on how

the process helped them as writers, by allowing them to “fix issues piece by piece” and not overwhelming them with “too many things to fix at once.”

Conclusions

Peer review is an essential process in building writer and reviewer confidence and in encouraging students to envision a wider audience than the teacher. In fact, Early and Saidy found that students like having multiple readers beyond their teacher and acknowledged that feedback from classmates made them better writers. If we are to equip our students to be career ready for the highly collaborative workplace, we need to develop their skills in reading and responding to the ideas of others. Yes, modeling effective peer review, breaking down the process and making it understandable, and addressing student concerns and questions about their roles as reviewers take time. However, peer review is critical to helping students see the socially interactive process of composing. Additionally, we need to listen to what our students tell us is helping them improve their writing and to set aside instruction time for well-designed peer review experiences.

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Appendix A: Student Survey

1. Did you bring drafts to all peer-review sessions?
 - Yes
 - No
2. If you did not bring drafts for peer review, what factors affected that decision?
3. What do you consider the most important benefit of peer review. Pick one.
 - Idea Generation
 - Revision Suggestions for Content Revision
 - Editing of Mechanical and Grammatical Weaknesses
 - Revision Suggestions for Organization of Ideas
 - Other (please specify)
4. Did your peer review sessions help you to improve the paper?
 - Greatly improved
 - Improved
 - Neither helped nor hindered
 - Did not improve
5. Did reading the papers of other students in the class help you revise your own paper?
 - Always
 - Occasionally
 - Never
6. How did the comments made by your peers during the peer-review session make you feel?
 - Greatly increased my confidence in my ideas/analysis
 - Increased my confidence in my ideas/analysis
 - Neither increased not decreased my confidence in my ideas/analysis
 - Greatly decreased my confidence in my ideas/analysis
 - No one responded to any of my papers
7. This question asks you to think about the small group of peer reviewers you worked with. How would you rate your comfort level in sharing and discussing your peers' writing face-to-face?
 - Very comfortable
 - Comfortable
 - Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
 - Uncomfortable
 - Very uncomfortable
 - Other (please specify)

8. We have done a number of different types of peer review in this class. Please select which type of peer review you felt benefited you in revising your papers.
 - Whole paper peer review
 - Targeted peer review that focused on one or two component parts of the paper
 - Idea-generation/prewriting peer review
 - Other (please specify)

9. Thinking about your answer to question #8, what about the type of peer review you selected made it valuable?