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Peer Evaluation and the Improvement of Student Writing

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PEER EVALUATION AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

by

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not the peer evaluation process could improve student writing and attitudes toward writing. Fifty-five eighth grade students participated in the study. The control group consisted of twenty students, and the experimental group consisted of thirty-five students. The same four creative writing assignments were given to both groups. Ten students with similar writing abilities were selected from each group. After completing each assignment, the twenty papers were photocopied and evaluated by three English instructors at the junior high school. Numerical scores representing the combined content and mechanics grades assigned by the instructors determined the results along with informal observations made by the teacher. The results indicated that the peer evaluation program increased the students' motivation and writing quality.

Peer Evaluation and the Improvement

of Student Writing

Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

Can peer evaluation improve student writing, and, if so,
how might it be integrated into the writing program so that
positive feelings about writing will be promoted?

Rationale

Teacher education courses often teach that the way to
improve student writing is to provide daily practice in
writing. Having students keep a daily journal is one way of
fulfilling this requirement. However, without feedback,
students will remain unaware of the writing and usage errors
they may be committing and, thus, unaware of what areas they
need to improve upon.

If a teacher assigned just three writing exercises per
week for a typical class load of 145 students, 435 papers
would have to be graded on a weekly basis, an impossible task
for any teacher.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not
a peer evaluation program is the solution to the overwhelming

paper load encountered when teaching students to write.

Peer evaluation is a process in which students edit, react, and respond to the writing of their peers (Weeks & White, 1982). By implementing peer evaluation in the English classroom, students could practice writing on a daily basis and be provided with immediate feedback and interaction from their peer editors. Criticism from a peer can sometimes be more acceptable and effective than the teacher's comments (Strenski, 1982). Two heads are better than one because two heads can make confusing material clear. In responding to a peer's suggestions, students make their writing more clear as they restructure it in response to the suggestions (Elbow, 1973). Through training and practice, peer editors will develop critical thinking and reading skills and will realize the value of rewriting and revising what they write.

For student writing to improve, students must have an opportunity to practice and receive constructive feedback on what they write. Peer evaluations encourage students to take more responsibility for their own work while giving them practice in mastering essential skills (Strenski, 1982).

Instructors can alleviate any fear of peer criticism by illustrating how professional writers go through the same kind of analysis. Providing students with specific guidelines and example evaluation sheets will help students to feel more comfortable with the writing process (Brown, 1984).

If successful, a peer evaluation program can be the key to an effective writing program that provides plenty of practice and growth within the English classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to support the implementation of a peer evaluation program in an English classroom by showing evidence of its effectiveness in improving student writing and promoting positive feelings about writing.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Benefits

When students write for a limited audience - the
teacher, they do not experiment with different writing styles.
Students write to fulfill the expectations of the teacher;
therefore, their writing is not genuine and is often boring
(Pianko & Radzik, 1980). Peer evaluating gives students an
opportunity to write for a variety of persons, their peers.
When students write for a wider audience, they develop a
greater awareness of the complexity of writing and the need to
fully and clearly develop their thoughts (Pianko & Radzik,
1980). Peer evaluation reinforces the writer's obligation not
just to express himself or herself, but, more importantly, to
communicate meaningfully to a reader by providing an
opportunity to rehearse before a live student audience
(Cooper, 1986).

Another benefit of peer evaluation is the confidence
developed in detecting one's own errors. Self-editing means
figuring out what one really means to say, getting it clear in
one's own mind, and getting it into the best words while
throwing away the rest (Elbow, 1973). Editing another's paper
helps in the recognition of common errors. This causes the
student to then be more critical of his or her own paper
(Pasternack, 1981).

Studies show that students actually enjoy the
opportunity to critique peer papers. They appreciate the
opportunity to work together and do not abuse it (Guinagh &

Birkett, 1982). Students value the response from their peers and consider their judgements to be impartial and accurate (Pianko & Radzik, 1980).

Implementation

Setting up a peer evaluation program in the classroom would not be without difficulty; however, if done properly, problems would be minimal. Developing peer evaluation skills in students is a long term process (Collins, 1984). The process needs to begin before the actual implementation of the program. By writing specific comments about the content of student essays, teachers begin to model the evaluation process for the students. One way of getting the program started is to bring in sample papers and tape recordings of actual peer editing sessions. The entire class could read, listen to, and discuss the process of evaluating writing. With this kind of practice, teachers can deal with questions or fears about peer feedback and point out the suggestions that are helpful and those that are not (George, 1984).

The first step in getting students involved would be to plan a group evaluation of an (anonymous) example essay. Students would be encouraged to make suggestions and comments for improvement. Teachers can elicit positive responses to this activity by praising specific suggestions and illustrating how suggestions improve the essay. Further practice would be given when the class is broken into small groups. Each group would be assigned a sample essay to evaluate and revise. The teacher then would be free to help guide the evaluation process as he or she met with each group.

Students can be taught to grade papers accurately and reliably by having them focus in on certain aspects of the paper to evaluate each time they read it, including grammar, wording, organization, and development of ideas (Guinagh & Birkett, 1982). To prevent students from writing just a pleasant comment or two or from being too harsh in their criticisms, students could be graded, periodically, on the quality of their evaluations (Pasternack, 1981). The student could also read aloud his or her own paper for the peer editor. This would involve the student in self-editing and provide the peer editor with additional information from which to make comments, since the writer would be present to explain (George, 1984).

To help alleviate the fear of writing criticism, the instructor should illustrate the steps of his or her own writing and rewriting process. This would allow students to see the thinking process involved in writing on a concrete, personal level. The instructor might ask the students to comment on his or her personal evaluation of his or her own writing or the instructor's evaluation of an anonymous work. The instructor should praise responses that show encouragement and respect for the writer (Collins, 1984).

Once peer evaluation is incorporated into the writing program, the teacher may want to vary the individual groups or student pairs to determine what works best. As part of the class requirement, students should be graded on the quality of their evaluative comments. In order to provide measurable guidelines, the instructor should develop a student evaluation

sheet for students to use as a checklist when evaluating another's writing. (See Appendix A) The successful completion of these steps for using peer evaluation in the classroom can determine whether or not this system can, in fact, improve student writing. Through peer evaluation students are urged to form a personal, meaningful understanding of writing. When this is achieved, students can better improve their own writing (Collins, 1984).

Results

In a peer editing study conducted by Weeks and White (1982), it was found that students progressed in the area of mechanics and in the overall fluency of writing. The peer editing group was more motivated and enthusiastic about writing because of the opportunity to peer edit, and the students voluntarily increased the length of their compositions weekly.

As indicated, implementing a peer evaluation program could provide benefits that are well worth the efforts it would require. Evaluating the writing of peers helps students develop analytical and critical thinking abilities (Broon, 1984). Trained editors not only grade competently and reliably, but also write better as a result of their practice (Thompson, 1981). Peer editors develop an enthusiasm for and confidence in writing. Most importantly, they will begin to take their writing and the writing of others seriously (Weeks & White, 1982). Peter Elbow illustrates these points in his book, Writing Without Teachers: "These readers give you better evidence of what is unclear in your writing. They're not just

telling you the places where they think your writing is
awkward because it doesn't conform to their idea of what good
writing is. They are people telling you where you actually
confused them." (p. 47)

Students can become proficient in the peer evaluation
process when careful planning and supervision are provided.
The following chapters suggest one method used to incorporate
the peer editing process in the English classroom.

Chapter III: Design of the Study

The ultimate goal of peer evaluation is to improve student writing. During the program, students should develop their own writing and gain respect for the individual process of writing. To achieve these positive outcomes, teachers must give special consideration to the planning involved in starting the program.

Procedures

The participants in this study were fifty-five eighth graders from a suburban junior high school in Jacksonville, Florida. Thirty-five students represented the experimental group, and twenty students were in the control group. The groups were heterogenously grouped according to ability, sex, and race.

Both groups were given the same creative writing assignments. Ten papers were selected from each group to be evaluated by three other English instructors at the junior high school. Four creative writing assignments were given to both groups over a three week period. The ten students from each group whose papers were selected were determined by the teacher as having varying degrees of writing ability. The final copies of the writing assignments were photocopied, and the English instructors were given the unmarked photocopies to evaluate and score. The English instructors were not aware of which papers were from the control group and which were from the experimental group. Errors made in capitalization,

punctuation, usage, and spelling were noted. Overall quality of the content of the papers was rated using a holistic assessment (i.e. content, organization, development). The instructors graded the photocopies using this same method and were asked to assign the papers a numerical score ranging from one to five. A score of 1 was considered poor, and a score of 5 was excellent.

Training sessions on the peer editing process were provided for the experimental group. The teacher displayed various, anonymous essays on the overhead projector and explained the steps involved in evaluating writing. As the essays were read aloud, specific comments were made about the content, and the students were asked for further suggestions. Mechanical errors were circled, and the teacher pointed out that the many mechanical errors in writing made reading the essay difficult. Prior to this, both the experimental and control groups had received the same training in mechanics and the composition process.

Upon completing the creative writing assignments, the control group's papers were evaluated and commented upon by the teacher. The writing of the experimental group was peer edited. Students were grouped in pairs to evaluate one another's papers. A peer editor's guide was given to each partner to assist in the editing process. (See Appendix)

The results of the study were determined by the scores given the photocopies that the three English instructors were asked to evaluate. Informal class observations of the success of the program and evaluation of the writing assignments by

the teacher were also noted.

Chapter IV: Results, Discussion and Recommendations

Results and Discussion

This study was conducted to determine whether or not a peer evaluation program could improve student writing and promote positive attitudes about writing. The results of the study indicate improvement in the quality of writing for the experimental group. Those participating in the peer evaluation process showed more progress in the grammar, mechanics, and overall clarity of their writing. Though there was not a great difference between the scores of the control and experimental groups, marked improvement in the quality of writing was noted in the experimental group. Due to the limited amount of time devoted to the study, the differences were not as great as anticipated.

Both the experimental and control groups had received the same training throughout the school year in mechanics and the composition process. The improvement in writing noted for the experimental group over the control group could be attributed to the fact that the students in the experimental group had to rewrite or revise their papers according to the peer evaluator's suggestions before handing the paper in for a final grade. This allowed the students to take into consideration the peer evaluator's comments and insured that each student read his or her paper through at least one more

time. Since the completed peer evaluator's guide (see Appendix) had to be handed in along with the final paper, the students realized that the teacher would be reviewing the peer guide suggestions and the final paper and may be looking to see that the students made the suggesed corrections.

The control group was told to check over their papers carefully and to rewrite them if needed before handing them in. Few students in the control group heeded this suggestion. The peer evaluation group received immediate feedback on their stories, whereas the control group had to wait for the teacher's response and could only apply the teacher's suggestions to the next assignment since their papers were already turned in for the final grade.

The average score assigned to the experimental group's papers was 3 (B), and the average score assigned to the control group's papers was 2 (C). These scores reflect the mechanics and content grades combined. Not every student in the control group completed and handed in the assigned stories even though it counted as part of the fourth nine weeks average. For example, when the second story assignment was made, five students handed their stories in late, and three students did not hand in a story at all. This was not true for the experimental group; each student in this group completed his or her assignments indicating that being involved in the peer editing process provided more motivation to write.

The teacher observed that the experimental group was more motivated and enthusiastic about writing because they enjoyed

the opportunity to edit one another's papers. The writing

topics assigned were centered around selected stories from the

eighth grade literature text. In one of the assignments

students were asked to imagine that they lived through a

famous event in history and were asked to write about

themselves and their impressions in diary form. Writing for

an audience provided motivation, a positive change in

attitudes toward writing. Students regarded their writing and

the writing of others more seriously as a result. Many

students in the experimental group began increasing the length

of their stories with each assignment adding more detail and

greater plot development.

Grades and point values were also assigned to the peer

evaluator's guide sheets (see Appendix). Teacher comments

were included on the first completed guides. This served to

further encourage the students to be specific and thorough in

filling out this guide. In the final evaluation of the

assigned stories, it was evident that the students made many

of the changes suggested by their peer evaluators to improve

their papers. Peer evaluating teams were randomly assigned

for each story evaluation, and this proved to be more

interesting to the students, allowing them to experience

differing viewpoints.

Recommendations for Implementation

For the purposes of the study, each paper was eventually

evaluated by the instructor. When utilizing the peer

evaluation program during the school year, the instructor

would not be expected to do this. Rather, once the students become proficient in the peer evaluation process, the instructor could choose just one in five writing assignments made to evaluate him or herself. This would reduce the teacher paper-grading load greatly while still giving the students plenty of practice in writing and receiving valuable feedback from their peers.

To begin this program in the classroom, the instructor must model the peer evaluation process for the students and provide guidance as the students evaluate one another's papers. One full class period should be provided for the students to do the evaluations and discuss their recommendations with one another. In order to discourage students from forming cliques and to add variety and new insights, peer partners should be reassigned at intervals.

Allowing students to view their own progress is also crucial to the success of the program. The student's writing assignments should be kept in a folder; a grade should be assigned for having completed all the assignments, and then the folders could be distributed to the students at the end of each grading period. Seeing their own improvement in writing will convince the students of the importance of editing and revising their work.

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Appendix: Peer Evaluator's Guide

Peer Evaluator-

Writer-

1. Title of story:

2. Does the opening sentence in the story make you want to read it? How could it have been written differently?

3. Did the writer make the main idea clear to you? What do you think is the main idea of the story?

4. What part of the story/essay did you enjoy most?

5. What parts of the story need to be written differently? Why?

6. What are the strengths of the story/essay?

7. What are the weaknesses of the story/essay?

8. Circle the beginning word in each sentence. Does the writer begin each sentence the same way? Suggest different opening words.

9. Are there any misspelled words in this story? Underline all misspelled words.

10. Are there any fragments? Write "Inc" next to each incomplete sentence.

11. Does the writer follow the correct punctuation and capitalization rules? Place a check where you find a mistake in capitalization or punctuation.

12. Are any of the sentences too short or choppy? Could any sentences be combined to sound better? Make suggestions.

13. Does the writer use good English? List words you feel should be changed.

14. Is the ending good? Does it really end the story?

How could it end differently?

15. Can you see the characters, things, and events clearly?
    Can the writer use more adjectives or descriptive
    details?   Make suggestions.

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