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The Effect of Peer-Editing on the
Quality of 11th Grade Composition

by

Barbara J. Ritchey

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The Effect of Peer-Editing on the

Quality of 11th-Grade Composition

Barbara J. Ritchey

University of North Florida

Abstract

The relationship between peer-editing and composition quality was investigated. The thirty subjects involved were 11th-grade English students randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. During a nine week period, both groups received the same assignments and teacher evaluation. The control group, which did not revise unless upon individual initiative, participated in a dramatics workshop while the experimental group used a worksheet developed by Leila Christenbury (1982) to edit and proofread each other's writing before evaluation by the teacher. Pre and post writing assignments were blind rated at the end of the experiment using the Diederich Rating Scale. Individual item scores and total scores were compared. The t-ratios proved insignificant at the .05 level. Positive student feedback, however, indicated that the procedure deserves further investigation.

Introduction

Problem Statement

English Educators have long viewed composition
with mixed emotions: pleasure when their students
show interest and promise, but dread when their hours
are filled with marking compositions. Researchers
in the field have been trying to formulate methods to
make the evaluation of composition more rewarding and
less time consuming. Many of these are exploring the
uses of peers in the evaluation process. This study
seeks to examine whether one method, peer-editing,
can improve the rhetorical, structural, and mechanical
quality of 11th-grade composition.

Rationale

The wealth of literature pertaining to the
teaching of composition attests to the diversity of
opinions concerning various problems and solutions
in the discipline. Some facts, however, are rarely
contested. One of these is that to write well one must
write often. But, as Marion Crowhurst points out, "If
students write as much as is desirable, the amount of
marking may be more than teachers can handle" (1979,
p. 757). Indeed, Karegianes, Pascarella, and Plaum
(1980) feel that teachers often refrain from assigning
themes for that very reason. Another fact is that good

writing is always a process. Thus the teacher is faced
not only with many compositions to evaluate but with the
many drafts of those compositions that good writing
requires. Gebhardt (1980) tells us that good teachers
do give instruction about the writing process but seldom
have the time to monitor or evaluate it; yet Elaine
Maimon feels it is vital to make time because,
"Composition teachers can do their most effective
teaching as they coach their students through successive
drafts and revisions" (1979, p. 366). Peer-editing
can relieve teachers of some editing tasks and thus
enable them to give more individual attention and
consideration to students involved in the writing
process.

Besides relieving teachers of tedious corrections,
peer-editing seems to have some other desirable effects.
One of these is that the students begin to perceive
revision as more than just a proofreading function
in the composition process. They see that revision
encompasses major changes as well as superficial
cosmetic ones. Several additional effects have to do
with the student's developing a sense of audience.
Many students are apprehensive of instructors as the sole
readers of their writing. Others quickly learn the
trick of writing what they think the instructor wants

rather than attempting to communicate their own ideas.
Pianko and Radzik (1980) think there may be a generation
gap between educators and students that influences
both the students' writing and the feedback given by
evaluators.   By giving students opportunities to write
for their peers, we give them a more realistic audience.
They receive immediate, often corroborative, feedback
from an audience they respect and trust.   They have
occasion to discuss ideas and develop skills to help
them in their own revision as well as to help others
with their work.   This dialog is probably one of the
most beneficial aspects of the peer-editing process.
In fact, several studies have shown that students
write much more carefully and thoughtfully for audiences
of their peers than they do for the instructor alone
(Strenski, 1982; Lewes, 1981).

Putting the obvious benefits aside, we are still
left with the question which this study hopes to address.
Can peer-editing improve the quality of student writing?
Karegianes et al. (1980) cite dissertation studies
which support both sides of the issue.   They feel,
however, that some of these studies may be flawed
due to the influence of other instructional factors.
"Thus, the seemingly positive results found in the
dissertation studies may actually have been due to

other factors, such as the multiplication of writing
experiences in one study" (p. 203). The authors also
cite Bouton and Tutty's study which specifically calls
for further work with careful control over such
confounding factors (cited in Karegianes et al., 1980).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine if
peer-editing can improve the rhetorical, structural,
and mechanical quality of 11th grade composition.

Review of the Literature

Composition Research

When Janet Emig studied the composition processes
of twelfth graders in 1971, she noted that, "Most
pieces of empirical research on the adolescent writer
focus upon the product rather than the process(es)
of their writing and, consequently, do not provide an
appropriate methodology for a process-centered inquiry"
(p. 19). Since 1971, however, most composition research
has focused upon composition as a process rather than
as a mere product. The main controversy now seems to
stem from whether this process should or even can be
segmented and sequenced.

Some rhetoric and composition texts try to segment
writing skills by having students complete writing
exercises; yet Moffett (1968) feels that the preteaching

of writing problems is futile. Many teachers of
writing believe that grammar and syntax must be
mastered before higher ordered skills can be judged,
but Perl concluded that, "the lack of proficiency in
basic writers may be attributable to the way in which
premature and rigid attempts to correct and edit
their work truncate the flow of composing without
substantially improving the form of what they have
written" (1980, p. 22). Perhaps the variety of
approaches to teaching composition is due to the variety
of philosophies as Steward suggests:

> If we are linguists, we work on their
> syntax; if we are perceptionists, we
> improve their powers of observation; if
> we are prewriters, we help them get their
> concepts manipulable before they begin
> to write; if we are behaviorists, we get
> them behaving and then proceed to modify
> that behavior on the spot; if we are
> rhetoricians, we make them aware of the
> subject, speaker/writer, and audience
> triangle and the way they must mediate
> between these entities (cited in Gebhardt,
> 1981, p. 156).

With this abundance of often contradictory material,

it is no wonder that educators are frustrated and
confused. Hirsh thinks that teachers are unlikely
to come to a consensus "in our present state of
ignorance" and in view of the diverse approaches,
habits, and convictions that educators hold (1980).
Perhaps the very complexity of the composition process
can assure that there is no one definitive technique
that will teach all students to write well.

So, what are educators to do with all the conflicting
information in the literature? Hirsh asserts that
researchers are on the brink of significant discoveries.
Already there are signs of agreement on at least
three major points:

1. Writing is a process (Emig, 1971).

2. To write well requires practice (Kirby
   & Liner, 1981).

3. All writers go through prewriting,
   writing, and revision stages, although
   there may be no overt evidence of these
   (Mayher, 1983).

That is a beginning. In the meantime research must
continue to develop and test promising techniques.

Evaluation of Writing

Donald E. Hirsh feels that evaluation is the
most pressing problem, both in the teaching and in the

research of composition (1980). The bulk of the literature discussing evaluation supports this notion. Basically, writing can be legitimately evaluated to judge writing growth and to advise students on particular ways to improve their writing. Most educators are convinced that it is not legitimate to evaluate writing simply for a classroom grade, a grade which is often counterproductive to any real growth in writing (Hillocks, 1982a).

In his essay, "Holistic Evaluation of Writing," Charles R. Cooper (1977) outlines various types of evaluation techniques. Two which seem especially valuable for measuring growth are holistic scoring, where raters are guided through a procedure in ranking pieces of writing, and essay scales, where pieces are judged by comparison to six or so other pieces of various quality. Two which can provide important feedback to the writer are analytical scales which rate writing either high, medium, or low on various criteria and Elbow's center of gravity response, which gives verbal gut reactions to the author (see Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging for a detailed discussion of these options). Another scale often used is the Diederich Scale, developed to produce high reliability when used by several raters. It is

popular because it can be used as an analytical
scale as well as an indicator of writer growth
(Kirby & Liner, 1981).

Research shows that evaluation of writing is
an abused tool in the classroom today. Rather than
resulting in improved writing, teacher evaluation and
comments often turn students off to composition. One
of the reasons for this may be that teachers are confused
about how to evaluate papers. They may mark grammatical
items either out of a sense that grammar comes first
or that these items are the ones they feel most
comfortable marking. Moffett (1968) reports, however,
that teaching grammar and rhetoric to improve writing
is futile. Erika Lewes (1981) adds that most students
view comments on papers as a form of punishment and
merely a way for teachers to justify grades.

Another fact that must be faced is that many
students do not trust feedback from teachers. They've
learned to write what the teacher wants to hear rather
than what they actually believe. The consequence of
such writing is that it is not genuine. It becomes
stilted academic prose (Pianko & Radzik, 1980). Part
of this problem stems from the fact that students
write for such a limited audience, often an audience
of one, the teacher. Moffett tells us that in an

ideal situation, "a maximum amount of feedback would
be provided in the form of audience response" (1968,
p. 193). A student cannot receive maximum feedback from
a single reader. Several authorities, Bruffee, Lamberg,
Peckham, and Weeks, have suggested creating larger
audiences by having students write for their peers,
displaying writing or having student writing published
in school and local newspapers. They contend that
students will write much more carefully for these
larger audiences.

Another problem with teacher evaluation is that
teachers generally grade products. They usually
haven't the time to coach students through successive
drafts and revisions, although this is probably where
they could be the most influential (Maimon, 1979).
Instead they give letter grades on products. Sometimes
they make comments or suggestions for improvement, but
these are moot to students in light of the posted
grades. What is needed instead is immediate, preferably
verbal, feedback on writing in process, an unmanageable
task for classroom teachers but a valuable and rewarding
task for the writer's peers.

The Use of Peers in the Composition Process

Basically peers have been used in two ways in the
composition process, as tutors and as evaluators.

Although research is limited and few formal studies have been performed, many educators are enthusiastic about the advantages of using peers in the composition process.

Peers have been used as tutors in several studies. One cited by Bruffee is Bloom's study, "Peer and Cross-age Tutoring in the Schools," in which Bloom states that 90% of the tutees in reported studies made significant gains (cited in Bruffee, 1980). Many colleges have followed suit and instituted tutorial writing programs in hopes of improving the writing skills of incoming freshmen.

Another method often employed by educators is the workshop method, where groups of students critique and advise each other. An interesting proponent of this method is Peter Elbow, who eliminates teachers from this process altogether and maintains that college level students and adults can improve their writing merely by group interaction (1973). Marion Crowhurst employed a writing workshop at the secondary level which also met with success (1979). Similar to writing workshops are programs that employ peers as graders. Many educators today are involving students in the grading process. John O. White (1982) trains students to use a holistic scoring guide to grade peers. Other

educators use a variety of rating scales, analytical scales, and questionaires to guide students through the evaluation process.

Whatever peer involvement procedures are used, educators are reporting enthusiastic, if somewhat unscientific, results and point to the many advantages of peer involvement in the composition process. Kirby and Liner (1981) summarize several of the main advantages. First, peer evaluation helps students realize that there is a basis for the grades they have been receiving from teachers. Second, by reading other students' papers, writers become sensitized to problems in their own writing. As they offer editing and proofreading advice to peers, they are also teaching themselves. The authors also found that students write more carefully for their peers. As Irwin Peckham points out, "When a student's friends are going to hear, read, or, worse, talk about what he has written, then a misspelled word, an inappropriate fragment, an incoherent sentence is worse than wearing checks with plaids or having bad breath" (1978, p. 62). Cathy O'Donnell (1980) feels that the value of group editing has been underestimated. One advantage she cites is the spotlighting of talented writers while those less talented are able to hear and read examples of good

writing on the same topics as their own. Other
advantages are increased motivation, real audiences,
and varied feedback (Crowhurst, 1979) as well as
the obvious advantage of fewer papers for the teacher
to grade. A less evident but equally important
advantage is the increase in class cohesion and
lessening of anonymity reported by Pianko and Radzik
(1980).

Though generally optimistic and positive, the
literature was careful to point out a few possible
pitfalls in the use of peers. The major one is that
peers, in whatever capacity used, must be carefully
trained and given explicit guidelines as to the feedback
expected from them (Karegianes, et al., 1980; Lamberg,
1980; Weeks & White, 1982). Secondly, attention must
be given to group dynamics so that a climate of trust
and helpfulness is built. As O'Donnell (1980) points
out, groups must have trust, believe that writing is
important, and be able to diplomatically, yet effectively,
comment on a piece of writing. She also noted that care
must be given to the formation of groups so that all
groups represent a variety of ability levels to assure
that everyone can learn from someone else. Thus,
with careful planning, many educators are coming to
see that peer involvement can be a viable alternative

to the common practices now employed, practices which

place the entire burden for teaching and evaluation

upon the already over-worked instructors.

Revision

Since we have only come to view composition as

a process in the last decade, very little research

has been done on its components, prewriting, composing

and revision. Some methods have been formulated to

teach these components, but the success of these remains

largely speculative in the absense of definitive research.

Since this study deals primarily with the revision

process, it is important to examine it in greater

detail.

Judy and Judy define revision as, "moving around

words and sentences and adjusting content" (1981, p. 92).

Murray views revision as, "seeing it again" (cited in

Kirby & Liner, 1981). Elbow chooses to call the process

editing and defines it as ". . .figuring out what you

really mean to say, getting it clear in your head,

getting it unified, getting it into an organized

structure, and then getting it into the best words

and throwing away the rest" (1973, p. 38). Koch and

Brazil call the final writing stage postwriting and

define it as the stage in which,

. . .the writer takes a cool, objective

look at his or her writing to see if it

really speaks to the audience and purpose

he or she has in mind; if it has the correct

tone and register he or she had hoped for;

if it is rhetorically structured for maximum

effect; and if the diction and syntax of

the sentences are precise and smooth. In

this editing process, then, the writer

is looking for major problems (1978, p.87).

Kirby and Liner (1981) feel that there are three

different but related activities in the revision

process. The first step is in-process revision,

where the writers adjust the writing to satisfy

themselves. The second step is editing, where the

writers alter their writing with the audience in mind.

And, finally, the third step, proofreading, where

the authors clean up their manuscripts. For the

purposes of this study, editing will refer to both

revision and proofreading activities.

Emig found that, "students do not voluntarily

revise school-sponsored writing" (1971, p. 93). Thus,

part of the educator's task must be to influence

students that this phase of writing is equally important

in producing good writing; a point Hillocks (1982b)

supports. Indeed, Hillocks further suggests that

revision not only makes individual papers more effective
but that the practice of revision can actually affect
the writing quality of subsequent new pieces of
writing (p. 276). Part of the problem, however, is
that many students don't know what is bad about their
writing to begin with. In other words, they haven't
an inkling where to start revision. Thus, after
convincing students that revising is important,
teachers must find methods that enable students to
see how to revise their papers effectively. Most
teachers with classes of twenty to thirty-five students
simply do not have the time available to work with
each student on each composition. It is unrealistic
to ask them to do so. Other methods must be found to
give students the feedback neccessary to make revision
both possible in the first place and meaningful in
the end. Recently, theorists have begun to argue
in favor of peer involvement as a means to stimulate
revision (Lewes, 1981). This study will examine
the effectiveness of peer-editing in the revision
process and draw some conclusions about its use.

<center>Design of Study</center>

Subjects and Groups

The students for this study will be drawn from
two classes of average eleventh grade English. The

groups are randomly assigned as a result of scheduling. One of the classes will serve as the control group, and the other will participate in the experiment. Students will have no knowledge of the experiment either prior to or during its conduction.

Instrumentation

Both groups will be given a pre and post writing assignment, each to consist of two pieces of writing, a personal narrative and a persuasion/argumentation paper. Topics will be as similar as possible so that growth may be judged from similar writing tasks. At the conclusion of the experiment, all papers will be scored by three raters using the Diederich Rating Scale (Cited in Kirby & Liner, 1981). The scorers will know neither the students' names, nor their group affiliation. They will not know whether the writing sample is a pre or post assignment.

Teaching procedures

For a period of nine weeks, students in each group will be given a weekly writing assignment on a variety of topics and written in various modes of discourse. All instruction, prewriting activities, and class discussions concerning the compositions will be as similar as possible. The only variable will be the training of the experimental group in the

use of a peer-editing worksheet developed by Leila

Christenbury (1982). The students in this group will

revise their papers based upon the suggestions made

by their peers before turning them in for evaluation

by the teacher. Students in the control group will

not be given the option of revision unless it is done

upon their own initiative and prior to evaluation.

All compositions from both groups will be graded by

the classroom teacher and will receive both a letter

grade and comments for improvement. While the

experimental group is engaged in peer-editing activities,

the control group will participate in a creative

dramatics workshop, with activities taken from Viola

Spolin's Improvisation for the Theater; a Handbook

of Teaching and Directing Techniques (1963).

Analysis of Data

At the end of the experiment, two series of

hypotheses will be examined. The first series of

hypotheses to be tested is that there will be no

significant differences between the individual item

and total ratings of personal narratives written by

the two groups taught by different modes of instruction

when rated by the Diederich Rating Scale. The second

series of hypotheses to be tested is that there will

be no significant differences between the individual

item and total ratings of the persuasion/argumentation pieces of the two groups taught by different modes of instruction when rated by the Diederich Rating Scale.

To compare the gain in scores, t-tests will be computed. The analysis will be computed for both groups by individual categories of the scale as well as for the total scores.

The ratings of the individual categories of the scale as well as the total scores will be averaged across the three raters to provide the scores for analysis. The reliability of the raters will be investigated by computing the Pearson product-moment correlations among the raters.

Results

Two series of null hypotheses were tested. In the first set the students were compared on pre and post persuasion/argumentation passages. None of the t-ratios were significant at the .05 level. (see table below) Therefore the null hypotheses for each category score and the total score were accepted. The second series compared the pre and post personal narrative passages. Once again the t-ratios were insignificant and the null hypotheses were accepted.

Table 1

T Comparison of the Pre/Post Gain Scores by Treatment

Group

Diederich Scale Category	Persuasion/ Argumentation	Personal Narrative
Ideas	1.286	.812
Organization	.729	1.424
Wording	.638	.696
Flavor	1.629	.655
Usage	1.929	.161
Punctuation	.177	.764
Spelling	.144	.168
Handwriting	1.385	1.501
Total	.996	.061

The reliability of the raters was investigated
using the Pearson product-moment correlation, the
results of which ranged from .586 to .755 for the
persuasion/argumentation writing samples and from
.568 to .755 for the personal narrative pieces. (see
table below) The relationship could only be termed
moderate in that the degree of agreement was 50%
or less.

Table 2

Agreement of Raters

Raters	Persuasion/Argumentation	
	Pre	Post
1 x 2	.755	.586
1 x 3	.737	.631
2 x 3	.658	.631

	Personal Narrative	
1 x 2	.755	.568
1 x 3	.737	.631
2 x 3	.658	.631

Conclusions

Because so many educators and researchers:
Kirby, Liner, Crowhurst, and Elbow to name a few,
are enthusiastic about the use of peers in the
composition process, the inconclusive results of this
study are disappointing but do not, of course, entirely
discredit the practices of peer-editing and peer
evaluation. Several factors may have affected the
outcome of this experiment.

Brown reports that "short term growth is not easy
to discern in a skill as complicated as writing" (1980,
p. 110). Thus, the nine week experiment may have
encompassed too short a time to expect any measurable
improvements in composition skills. Brown also suggests
that "before and after essay questions require the
same primary skills in order to minimize the problems
of comparability of the essays" (p. 112). Although
the two pre and post writing assignments were the
same type of writing, perhaps they did not require
similar skills. Brown further suggests that blind
pairs of pre and post writing samples should be judged
by raters who merely pick the better of the two pieces.
This method of evaluation might have yielded more
positive results than did the use of the Diederich
Scale employed by self-trained raters who achieved
only a moderate degree of reliability.

Finally, then, we must examine the group-editing
processes of the experimental group. The students
had difficulty using Christenbury's questions (see
Appendix) to improve peer writing. They seemed to
understand the concept of main idea, for instance,
but were at a loss to make specific suggestions to
improve peer compositions. They understood the need
for transitions from class instruction but could not

apply this knowledge to the transition problems of
peer essays. As a class, they probably should have
had more specific instruction in the application
of concepts and more practice with the process of
·improving papers. Model essays should have been
employed more frequently to give the class varied
experiences in editing and proofreading. Using
a variety of checklists, rating scales, and evaluation
forms might also have given them more experience and
eliminated some of the apathy that occurred during
the final weeks of the experiment.

Recommendations

The students in the experiment were genuinely
interested in what their peers had written and,
conversely, in what peers had to say about their
own work. They generally enjoyed the group-editing
experience. Discussions were often stimulating and
sometimes heated when students disagreed. Everyone
was engaged, especially at the beginning of the experiment
when it was a fresh idea. When questioned about the
experience, most students had positive responses.
They especially enjoyed peer interaction and valued
peer comments. The majority of the students felt
their work improved after the peer-editing and proofreading.
It seems that peer-editing might be justified simply

for its positive effect on students' perceptions of the composition process. If it can also improve that process, as many educators believe, definitive research must now show how and to what degree.

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Appendix A

Writing Stimuli

1. Pre-writing assignment: After reading
    "What Redburn Saw in Lancelott's Hey" by Herman
    Melville, the students discussed what the individual
    owes society. They then wrote to argue for or
    against the state adoption of a "Good Samaritan"
    law.

2. Pre-writing assignment: After discussion of
    "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" and "Because
    I Could Not Stop For Death" by Emily Dickinson,
    students were asked to share a personal encounter
    with death, fantasize about the actual moment
    of death, or speculate upon life herafter.

3. Students read selected poems from Edgar Lee
    Master's Spoon River Anthology and discussed
    lessons learned from experience. Later they
    wrote about lessons experience had taught them.

4. Students were asked to write a olassification
    theme. Lesson and topics were taken from David
    Powell's "What Can I Write About?" (1981).

5. On the Tuesday of the New Hampshire primary,
    the classes discussed the various candidates
    and platforms and then wrote in support of the
    candidates of their choices. A mock election

was held the next day.

6. Students were asked to write a description.
   Lesson and selected topics were taken from
   "What Can I Write About?"

7. Students were given a list of objective and
   subjective case pronouns to use in an original
   story.

8. Students were asked to compare and contrast two
   items. Lesson and topics were selected from
   "What Can I Write About?"

9. After a discussion of the pending school prayer
   legislation, students brainstormed pros and cons
   and then wrote a paper supporting their positions.

10. Students were asked to write a process paper.
    Lesson and selected topics were taken from "What
    Can I Write About?"

11. Students were asked to write a cause/effect
    composition. Lesson and topics were selected
    from "What Can I Write About?"

12. Post-writing assignment: Students were asked
    to write a personal narrative. Topics were
    selected from "What Can I Write About?"

13. Post-writing assignment: After brainstorming
    the pros and cons of abortion legislation, students
    argued either for or against in a composition.

Appendix B

Leila Christenbury's Peer-Editing Worksheet

There are three members of the group, each of whom alternately takes the role of author, editor, and then proofreader. Each member, in turn:

presents his or her written work,

edits a group member's work,

proofreads a member's work.

Note: The teacher will call time for each step and indicate when the editor should hand his or her composition to the proofreader.

As an author, your responsibility is to present a clean, readable rough draft. For the purposes of this plan, please double-space your draft.

As an editor, your responsibility is to review a rough draft and ask yourself--and the author-- the following:

What is the main idea of the piece?

What aspects of the main idea are evident?

Are sufficient examples, support, or illustrations used?

Are there smooth transitions between ideas? between Paragraphs?

Is the end of the paper satisfactory?

Does the reader of this piece have any
lingering questions or doubts?

As a proofreader, your responsibility is to
review an edited rough draft and ask yourself--
and the author--the following:

Is the language concrete, specific?

Are words used accurately?

Is there any repetition of words or ideas?

Is there correct spelling? punctuation?

subject/verb agreement? pronoun/antecedent

agreement?